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Mangal Pandey

the true story of an Indian Revolutionary

Amaresh Misra

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MANGAL PANDEY

The True Story of an Indian Revolutionary

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To,
the 1857 Hindu-Muslim solidarity

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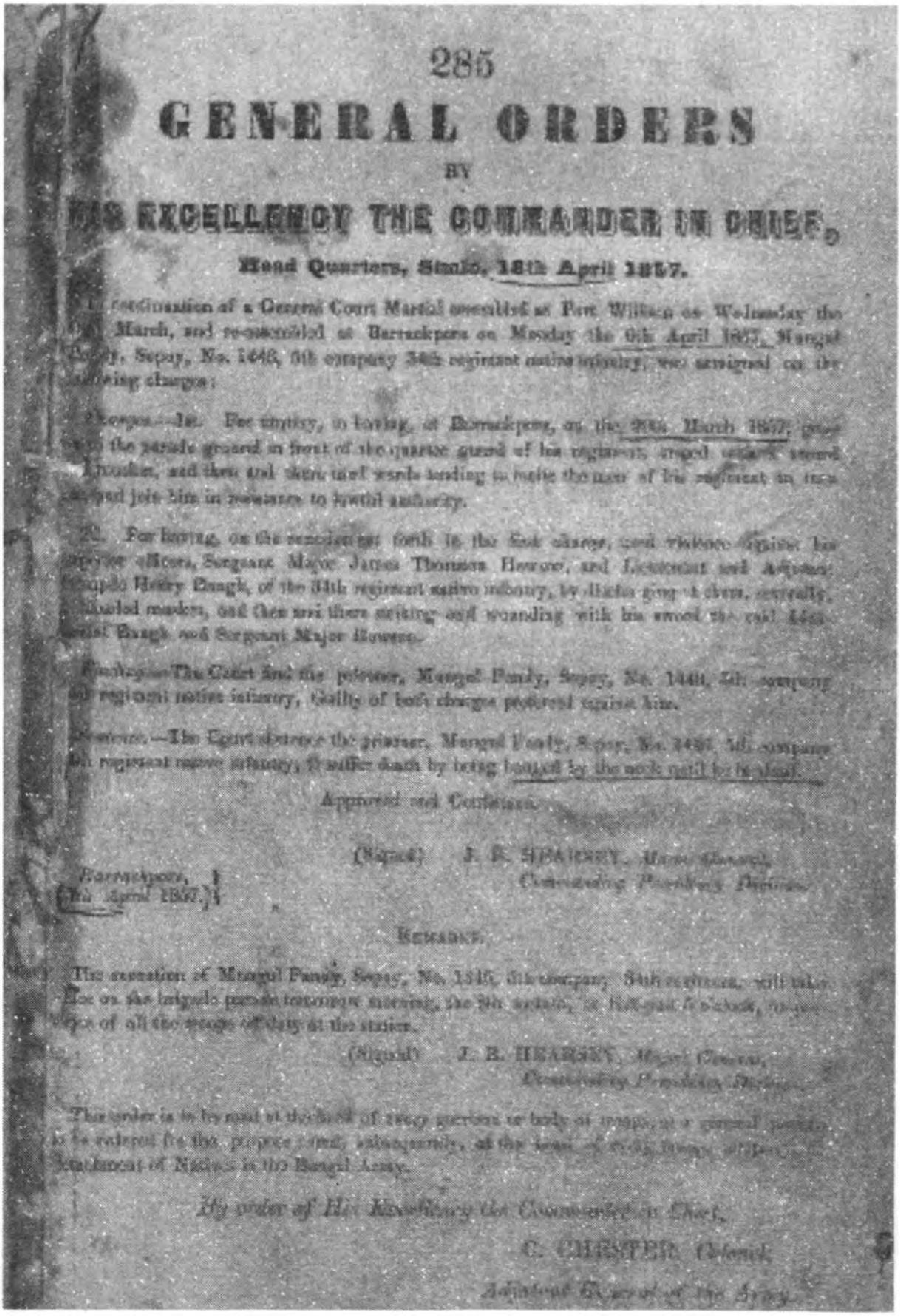
Acknowledgements

Pragati Sharma, my wife, critic and lover for balancing emotion and reason.

People of Faizabad and Ayodhya—they revealed indigenous sources and retain till today the passion for radical Hindu-Muslim unity.

Mangal Pandey's Execution Order



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GENERAL ORDERS

BY

HIS EXCELLENCY THE COMMANDER IN CHIEF,

Head Quarters, Simla, 18th April 1857.

[illegible] continuation of a General Court Martial assembled at Fort William on Wednesday the [illegible] March, and re-assembled at Barrackpore on Monday the 6th April 1857, Mungul Pandy, Sepoy, No. 1446, 5th company 34th regiment native infantry, was arraigned on the following charges:

Charges.—1st. For mutiny, in having, at Barrackpore, on the 29th March 1857, gone on the parade ground in front of the quarter guard of his regiment, armed with a sword and a musket, and then and there used words tending to excite the men of his regiment to come out and join him in resistance to lawful authority.

2d. For having, on the occasion set forth in the first charge, used violence against his superior officers, Serjeant Major James Thornton Hewson, and Lieutenant and Adjutant Bempde Henry Baugh, of the 34th regiment native infantry, by firing at them, severally, his loaded musket, and then and there striking and wounding with his sword the said Lieutenant Baugh and Serjeant Major Hewson.

Finding.—The Court find the prisoner, Mungul Pandy, Sepoy, No. 1446, 5th company 34th regiment native infantry, Guilty of both charges preferred against him.

Sentence.—The Court sentence the prisoner, Mungul Pandy, Sepoy, No. 1446, 5th company 34th regiment native infantry, to suffer death by being hanged by the neck until he be dead.

Approved and Confirmed.

(Signed) J. B. HEARSEY, *Major General,*
Commanding Presidency Division.

Barrackpore,
7th April 1857.

REMARKS.

The execution of Mungul Pandy, Sepoy, No. 1446, 5th company, 34th regiment, will take place on the brigade parade tomorrow morning, the 8th instant, at half-past 5 o'clock, in presence of all the troops off duty at the station.

(Signed) J. B. HEARSEY, *Major General,*
Commanding Presidency Division.

This order is to be read at the head of every regiment or body of troops, at a general parade to be ordered for the purpose, and, subsequently, at the head of every troop, company or detachment of Natives in the Bengal Army.

By order of His Excellency the Commander in Chief,

C. CHESTER, *Colonel,*
Adjutant General of the Army.

Prologue

Date: March 29 1857. Place: Barrackpore in the Bengal division. "*In some opinions this day sees the outbreak of Mutiny proper: the Mangal Pandey incident. The 34*th *BNI had a British sergeant Major, Hewson by name, attached to it, and he was told that a sepoy by the name of Mangal Pandey had come out of the lines with his musket loaded, which was against standing orders. In turn, he informed Adjutant Lieutenant Baugh. Hewson and Baugh found Mangal Pandey outside the quarter guard calling on his comrades to help him strike a blow for their religion: he fired at Baugh and brought down his horse, and then took on both Hewson and Baugh with his tulwar and was a match for them both. The Sepoy was clearly under the influence of some drug, although he was previously of good character. The guard of twenty* *sepoys looked on unconcerned, only one Sheikh Paltu, came to the aid of the Europeans and held Mangal Pandey while they escaped. Colonel Wheeler of the 34*th *came up and ordered the guard to arrest the mutineer but no one obeyed him. Similarly Brigadier Grant came up and was ignored. Mangal Pandey was continuing to taunt his comrades. Hearsey and his two sons then rode up and Hearsey with some courage threatened the guard with his revolver and forced them to move against the mutineer, but the latter turned his musket against himself: he fell wounded and was arrested and taken off to the hospital*".[1]

Thus began the saga of Mangal Pandey, then the first mutineer, now the first hero of the first war of Indian Independence. Who was he? What were his motivations? Who were the British officers whose names appear in records and history? What was their relation to the man? Was Mangal Pandey a conscious revolutionary or actually acting under the impulse of some drug? What were the conditions that produced a character like him? Was he linked to earlier, and later, events? Was he part of a wider conspiracy of acting alone? What implications did the Mangal Pandey incident really have on the wider uprising that took place in May that year, an uprising that shook the foundations of the greatest Empire of the day?

A hundred and forty eight years after the Barrackpore incident when India is close to celebrating the 150th anniversary of the event, these questions remain, at best, an enigma. The fact of the matter is that India knows very little about her first hero. Documents are scarce and mention only the outlines; the Indian literary world, and books on 1857, has ignored him; there is a major dispute about his place of birth and origin[2]; and it is only now that a film has been made[3].

Half-wit accompanies ignorance—for some Mangal Pandey is a Hindu hero; for others he killed a lion with his bare hands. Mangal Pandey is either a mythological figure or a mere bust in some dusty Indian corner.

India had had to pay a price for this deliberate negligence. The soon to be released film is rumorued to have been made with a British or an Anglo-Indian perspective. If that indeed is the case then future generations will grow up seeing Mangal Pandey as a Far Pavilion dandy. He might also emerge as a brown hero of a typical Raj tale—a philistine, exotic fellow; an opium addict; someone saying 'memsahab' at the drop of a hat and chasing skirts of a white complexion.

Then, if the film is genuine and is able to bring out the fire and passion of Mangal Pandey's story, it will lack the authenticity and credibility only a scholarly treatise can provide.

The following chapters are intended to fulfill the lacunae—backed by research and the use, for the first time, of indigenous material. They seek to answer the questions posed by the Mangal Pandey riddle. They offer a short introduction, a perplexing prelude to 1857. The story they unfold is shocking—Mangal Pandey emerges from historical footnotes as an actor in context who turned the tide, virtually changed the course, in a defining moment of Indian history. They puncture all images conjured of the man by men and women down the centuries whose motives remain a victim of their time. The motives of this author might be a victim of *his* time. They are, however, as close as one can get to the ethos, which produced Mangal Pandey.

References

1. '*What Really Happened During the Mutiny*, OUP, P.J.O. Taylor, pp.37.
2. A couple of families in Nagwa and Haldi, two villages in Ballia, Uttar Pradesh also claims to be Mangal's descendants. The author, however, has located his birthplace in Faizabad.
3. *Mangal Pandey: The Rising.*

ONE

The North Indian Brahmin Ethos

Mangal Pandey was a revolutionary *and* a north Indian Brahmin. Writing in 1907, on the eve of the fiftieth anniversary of 1857, V.D. Savarkar, the much maligned, partly understood Marathi intellectual who began as an indigenous secularist and ended as the controversial guiding spirit behind Hindu Mahasabha, knew Mangal Pandey as such[1].

Unlike later historians, Savarkar was more familiar with the Indian social oxymoron—the existence, simultaneously of liberal and a Hindu, Muslim and a socialist. The Indian freedom struggle is ridden with examples where caste categories did not come in the way of someone being passive. In fact the whole linkage of traditional categories with backward social formations and colonial prototypes with advanced (read western) civilizations was a subtle colonial game summed up by a famous British official. He stated: "We are all proud Christians and enlightened people, drawing sustenance from a 18th century movement which stressed reason over faith while keeping our faith alive for political reasons. But let not that quarter be given to a Hindoo. Let him think that Hindoo culture and civilization itself is decadent and sustains a temper, which cannot be scientific. Thus devoid of a knowledge of his own past and culture the Hindoo will come to us—he will think of us as holding the key to progress"[2].

The intention here is clear—of denying a people information and scholarship about indigenous history—of terming indigenous history itself as a backward category; of instilling an inferiority complex about religious and socio-cultural identity.

The westernized secular elite miss a vital point: eastern civilizations have not had the experience of living under the medieval Christian faith. It was the revolt of puritans against papacy and then rationalists against purists that produced revolutionary changes in Europe and North America. Medieval Christendom was a closed shop of superstition and decadence where there was little room to innovate from *within*.

Islam, by contrast, had the notion of *Ijtihad* (independent thinking). Ancient India and China too had systems of rational philosophies and social conduct in the marrow of religious beliefs. Moreover, struggles between orthodoxy and progressive innovation were a constant theme. Islam had Mutazilites (rationalists) as early as the tenth century. Islamic empires produced scientists, scholars and philosophers like Ibn Sina, Ibn Rushd, Al Farabi and Al Kindi. Known as Avicenna in the west, Ibn Sina laid the foundation of modern medicine. Ibn Rushd re-discovered Plato and Aristotle, Al Kindi and Al Farabi broke new ground in hydraulics and discovered the symphony, the cornerstone of western classical music[3].

These four scholars represent just a tiny spectrum of intellectuals who created the Arabic renaissance and enlightenment. Western societies were barbaric, superstitious and bigoted at that time. The Arabic renaissance laid the basis of the western renaissance—something recognized by Dante, the father of western renaissance.

Everyone knows that modern science evolved out of the helio-centric concept of the universe. If Galileo had not challenged the Christian idea of a geo-centric universe the west would still be grappling with the absurd notion of the sun revolving around the earth.

But was Galileo the first helio-centrist? "The earth rotates around its axis [27:88], rotates around the sun [7:54], is not flat but is like a ball [39:5] or an egg [79:30]". This Koran quotation predates Galileo by eight hundred years. "The heavens are expanding [51:47]". The pictures taken by Edwin Hubbell in Mount Wilson observatory in 1929 showed that the universe was expanding which led to the Big Bang theory. The Koran anticipated this by fourteen centuries.

The Bible differentiates the sun and the moon only by size: "God made two great lights—the greater light to govern the day and the lesser light to govern the night. He also made the stars." [Genesis 1:16]. The Koran tells us that: the sun is a shining glory while the moon is a light [10:5]; the sun is a lamp and the moon is a light [25:61,71:16]; the sun is a blazing lamp [78:13]

Unlike the Koran, the Bible resisted secular interpretations—western rationalists therefore had to break the shell of religion. But what is the need to rupture religion when it is not a religion like Christianity and encourages the pursuit of reason?

Similarly, 'Brahminical' Indians were aware that the universe is helio-centric even before Islam. Arab and Iranian adventurers refined the knowledge gained basically from India and China. Algebra was called Al-Hind and Arabic prescriptions Unaani (Greek) medicine. During the mediaeval era it was Bhava Misra who propounded the circulation of blood theory much before William Harvey. The democratic idea in the sense we understand it now was expressed first in Emperor Akbar's *Sulh-i-Kul* ('Peace and Fraternity With All'). Ideas of social equality, individual freedom, and peasant *Inquilab* (revolution) were all worked out in an indigenous non-western, non-English lingo by social reformers like Shah Waliullah and Pandit Jagannath and leaders of 1857.

Documents, which prove or disprove, whether such knowledge was part of Mangal Pandey's ethos, do not exist—what is available, however, is the full spectrum of Brahmin beliefs in which even astrology anticipates a heliocentric universe. What kind of a world did Mangal Pandey live in?

According to the Indian Varna system, Brahmins occupy the highest scale in the order of castes. The Indian caste system itself is a flexible phenomenon having evolved over thousands of years since the now disputed encounter between Aryans and non-Aryans. At one time during the Vedic age the caste system was based on colour and profession—these, however, were not inflexible categories: people could move up and down the scale according to their deeds. The *Mahabharata*, speaks of several such instances. In fact one of the chief advisors of the Pandavas, the victorious clan in that battle of all the great kings of the land (now presumed to have taken place sometime around the 1200 BC) was the son of a servant mother[4]. Yet he was respected for his wisdom. Accorded a high place next only to kings, there is no written or oral record of any negative discrimination against him.

Similarly in the *Ramayana*, the other celebrated epic, Lord Rama, the king of Ayodhya and the pre-eminent power of Brahmavarta[5] dines with a low caste woman and embraces a low caste *nishad* (boatman). To engage Ravan, the demon of Lanka, in a final do or die battle, Rama organizes an army of apes and other animals (either tribes with animal totems or an earlier species maybe Homo erectus existing side by side with Homo sapiens).

Then, around the second-fourth century AD a group of Brahmavarta Brahmins[6] revived the Vedic religion, almost wiped out from the Indian subcontinent by Buddhism and other non-Vedic faiths. Tribes and peoples from Central Asia like Kushanas, Parthians, Greeks, and Scythians had invaded India after the fall of the Maurya Empire. The latter emerged following the challenge posed by Alexander's invasion in 321 BC—caste did not play a role here as well.

At the time of Alexander's invasion, *Sodas Janpads* or sixteen republics stretching from the plains of Punjab in north India to the peninsular south dominated India. A comparison of these republics with contemporary Greek city-state democracies is tempting. But climacteric contrariety separated the east and the west. Slavery, the major basis, almost a *raison d'être* of Greek democracies was absent—ancient India recognized slaves, mostly of a household nature. However, and this is crucial, slaves did not play a decisive role in the production.

Indian republics had a production system based on a division of labour in which all classes, classified into castes had a duty to perform. A Brahmin not willing to preside over the rites of the village temple might lose his share of produce of the peasant's crop. Now the peasant—he appears in European literature at a much later date, during the time of feudalism after the fall of the Roman Empire—was a specific category in ancient India. He was the mainstay of the republics and their very Asiatic production system.

Alexander encountered some of these republics but he also faced monarchies. By the 300s, monarchies were replacing the republics—Magadha was one such entity, which Alexander's soldiers feared as much as the weather in India. Later after Alexander left, leaving behind a satrapy under Selucas Nicator, Chanakya, a Brahmin and Chandragupta, an ordinary son of a servant mother got together with the dream of building an Indian empire. Both Chanakya and Chandragupta realized that the time of republics was over—political unity under a great Indian monarch was *the* answer to foreign attacks.

The Mauryan Empire, which emerged from the churning, defeated Selucas, liberated India from the Greek yoke and united the subcontinent north to south, blending republics and monarchies into a single entity. It gave India an identity, which exists till today. The memory of the Mauryan Empire made possible the acceptance by Indians of the later Gupta and Mughal Empires, both of which can be seen as similar Asiatic empires attuned to the needs of their day.

The theme of united action of the Brahmin and the low caste Shudra underlay the history of the Mauryan adventure. Chanakya and Chandragupta built an Empire, which rivalled all similar experiments of the day[7]. Besides numerous advances in science, medicine and the arts, the Mauryan Empire gave the first full treatise of political economy[8], joining politics with the art of economic/people management.

By the fourth century AD India needed another empire and the Brahmins again created the intellectual environment for a religious-cultural renaissance. Their problem was not with Buddhism per se but the fact that largely foreign races, bent upon subjugating India had appropriated Buddha's universal teachings.

The movement initiated by Brahmavarta Brahmins produced the eighteen Puranas—they popularized the Vedic religion as a religion of, colour, festival and magic—in short a popular religion for the masses. The stories of Rama and Krishna, *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* and many more were recycled in perhaps the most creative motion ever seen by the world.

Target audiences of Pauranic Brahmins were the numerous tribes brought into political unity by the Mauryas but lacking an overwhelming cultural link. The move was political—it assimilated the rituals and gods of tribes in one great Indian religion, to be used against the foreigners. These efforts produced Sanatan Dharma, the new chapter in Vedic religion. Again, as if in a repeat historical performance, the Sanatan Dharma impulse produced the Gupta Empire, which expelled Scythians and other foreigners. The Gupta Empire gave a giant push to the science and arts[9]—much on the pattern of the Mauryan Empire it symbolized a victory for the Shudra-Brahmin combination.

The continuity is amazing—the old Brahmin image—the king's advisor—stood modified. He was shown both as the best upholder and the formidable opponent of the status-quo—the quintessential iconoclast and the great preserver of icons.

The Central Asian Hun tribes attacked India in the post Gupta period—the latter were defeated politically but Huns stayed back—they were converted to Sanatan Dharma and given the ranks of Kshatriyas or the warrior castes, later known as Rajputs (the breed of kings). This was, however, the time of the rise of Monotheism in world culture. Islam had emerged with the concept of an impersonal, omnipotent God—more a power ruling the heavens and the earth than a figure to be worshipped as an idol. Islam came to India as early as the eighth century. Around the same time Adi Shankacharya, the Kerala Brahmin undertook a tour of India and came up with Vedanta—or the culmination of the Vedic religion. The parallel with Muhammad Sahab announcing the end of the messianic Semitic monotheistic religions—*his* message being the last—is striking.

Adi Shankaracharya gave Sanatan Dharma a monastic fervour—recalling both Christian and Buddhist practices, orders for the defense of religion were established. But Shankaracharya's masterstroke was the promulgation of an Indian concept of the ultimate formless reality, a Param Brahma, very similar Islam's Allah. This Sanatan Dharma was Advaita (non-dualistic); it symbolized a power independent of man.

Shankaracharya had to face the ire of orthodox co-religionists—he was in this sense again an iconoclast—after him Sanatan Dharma with its force of organized saints and orders became a regular feature of Indian village life. Numerous movements emerged from his fold—the most important of which was the Bhakti movement.

Coming in line with Islam's third advent in India, the first being confined to Sind and the second mainly a raid in North and west India[10]; the Bhakti movement produced the phenomenon of Brahmin as the peasant. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries when Islamic-Turkic Empires were establishing their base in India, they got support from Sanatan Dharma forces. The peasantry, in particular of the Avadh region in Central Uttar Pradesh, fought alongside the Ghazis[11] or warriors of Islam.

Bhakti stimulus blended well with the Sufi impact. The first Sufis had already appeared in India by the tenth-eleventh century and it was they, more than the kings, who took Islam with its egalitarian message to the people. In time several movements were to combine Islam and Sanatan Dharma to produce cults and new religions.

Sant Tulsidas was a great Bhakti poet—he lived during Akbar's time but his works including a sixteenth century interpretation of the *Ramayana*, are pure literary masterpieces. They combine theology with folk poetry and genuine literature. Tulsidas was a Brahmin and an angry one at that—he too fought with orthodoxy which opposed his moves to write Rama's story, originally in Sanskrit, in Awadhi, the local UP dialect. Tulsidas's radical ardour was unassailable—he raved and ranted against restrictions imposed on him and threatened at one time to marry off his daughter to someone other than the Brahmins.

With Tulsidas the era of the Brahmin peasant finally dawned. Akbar, the Mughal king was said to have appreciated and helped the saint poet. It is uncanny that later Akbar was taken to symbolize the just ruler Tulsidas had so passionately seen in the figure of Rama.

The Mughal Empire saw itself as an Indian Empire and Indians too were to equate it later with the Maurya and the Gupta Empire. The alliance of the Brahmin peasantry and the Mughals was an act of faith. Birbal, a major Akbar courtier was a Kanyakubja[12] Brahmin and he helped Akbar create a Brahmin aristocracy, known for its fierce loyalty and independence.

This aristocracy suffered during the eighteenth century—it, however, forged new links with the regional power emerging after the decline of the Mughal Empire in Awadh. The Awadhian Nawabs cut out virtually a new deal with the predominantly Brahmin and Rajput peasantry. Then the British came—following the defeat of Shuja-ud-Daulah, the Awadhian Nawab in the battle of Buxar[13] the British penetrated deep into Awadh. Checked a while by Shuja-ud-Daulah's sons and descendants they turned to the Awadhian peasantry for recruitment in the new army they were building.

The British came as traders; their new army was part of the East India Company. It tapped the enormous market of martial people in the Awadh and east UP region. Company soldiers were called sepoys—they were given tight jackets, *shakos* (headdress), tunics and pants to wear in the European style. Overnight Tulsidas's followers were turned into members of semi-European regiments.

The change was as dramatic as it was singular. Brahmins had been part of the cavalry dominated Mughal armies. But these armies had a roving nature—tied to mansabdars or the military-administrative elite they were nevertheless fluid moving from one commander to the other. The Mughals had created a largely city oriented professional army—the British sepoys were part of a professional peasant army.

The search for peasant recruits was a common phenomenon—the Marathas, Tipu Sultan of Mysore and Ranjit Singh of Punjab—all contenders of the British in the 18th-19th centuries—looked towards the villages[14].

Brahmins and Rajputs in fact constituted the upper peasantry—related in some instances to the big landlords, they were the pattidars or swollen brotherhoods enjoying an ancient land share in village land. Many of them laboured with their hands and touched the plough. A whole category of Bhumihar Brahmins came up with explicit links to land and plough.

Yet this was no Japanese peasantry thrust suddenly to fight the earlier Samurai tradition during the Japanese civil wars of the 1870s. The caste factor was predominant—the Brahmin as peasant was also a man who controlled the village—by the early nineteenth century along with Rajputs he constituted an emerging ruling class. The Awadhian Nawabs had recognized their power. Awadh had a talukedari system where big landlords controlled areas like fiefs. But due to the caste system a fief lord had to recognize, sometimes even extol, the rights of his otherwise economically inferior caste brethren.

The peasantry was armed and in the extremely aqueous eighteenth century conditions switched loyalties. The Brahmin traditionally looked upon himself as the custodian of the moral order—this, however, did not mean, as has been illustrated above. a defense of a 'bad' order. Brahmins had the right to proclaim any status quo evil and sanction insurrection. At the same time they were peasants and sepoys with emerging individual, petty bourgeois interests.

Mangal Pandey's village society was in a state of acute flux—his own sepoy world was crumbling. He was a Brahmin of Awadh who had to set things right even if it meant revolt.

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1. *Attharah sau sattavan ka Bhartiya swantantra Samar*, V.D. Savarkar, Rajdhani Granthagar, New Delhi, 1995
2. Lord Lake's private papers.

3. See *Religion, Learning and Science in the Abbasid period*, Cambridge University Press 1990.
4. Vidur, the learned one.
5. Present day Awadh.
6. The reference is to the second century AD movement launched by Nemisharanya Brahmins in Sitapur, Awadh.
7. The Roman and Persian Empires.
8. Chanakya's *Arthashastra*.
9. The Gupta period is known as India's Golden period. It produced Kalidasa (poet), Dhanvantri (physician) and Aryabhatta (scientist) plus hundreds of scholars in every field.
10. Mahmud Ghazni's raīd in Haryana and Somnath.
11. Ghazi Baba, an Islamic warrior of Ghazni's army became a folk hero in Awadh. His shrine in Bahraich is now a major pilgrimage center.
12. Along with Gaur, Saraswat, Maithal and Utkal, Kanyakubja Brahmins constitute the five main North Indian Brahmin sub-caste: 'Kanyakujaha Dwijaha Sreshthaha'.
13. Fought in 1764.
14. See *Indian Society and the Making of the British Empire*, C.A. Bayly, Orient Longman, 1990, chapter 3.

TWO

Mangal Pandey: His Early Life

One hundred and twenty-seven kilometres from Lucknow stands Faizabad city; built by Nawab Shuja-ud-Daulah in the 1760s it housed his wives during their notorious dispute with Governor General Warren Hastings, which led to the opening of an inquiry against the British official and the washing of much dirty 'White' linen in public.

Mangal Pandey was born in Faizabad's Akbarpur Tehsil. The latter were British administrative divisions borrowed from post-Mughal Indian administrative lingo—they symbolized the level immediately below the *zillah* (district).

The date, as recorded in shattered pages of documents still retained by surviving members of his clan[1], was presumably 19 July 1827—these details are arrived at by calculating backwards from the Hindu calendar, the Vikram Samvat, followed by Indian astrology.

Vikram Samvat starts from AD 57; according to these calculations Mangal's birth took place on the second Friday of Ashadh Shukl—this can only be July as Ashadh covers the period from 15 July to 15 August.

The village in which young Mangal opened his eyes was Surhurpur—a small sleepy hamlet, which still retains the dusty rustic look, that speck of golden grime, the wont of Awadh, distinguishing the region from the greener pastures of east UP. Divakar Pandey, Mangal's father actually belonged to another village—Dugvaan-Rahimpur in Faizabad Tehsil. He had settled in Surhurpur as his father-in-law had no male heir—the village property therefore was bequeathed to the son-in-law.

Divakar Pandey's circumstances must have been pressing—it was still not normal for a Brahmin son-in-law to accept the status of a *ghar jamai* (resident son-in-law). Hindu property laws did not give property rights to women—so Divakar's move to his wife's village must have denoted a change in convention.

That such material interests were seeping into village society is supported by other sepoy accounts[2] as well as Sleeman's travels through Awadh[3]. In *Kissa Pande*[4] the author

Subedar speaks of how his father allowed his entry into the sepoy army because there was a land dispute case pending in court and Subedar's sepoy status was supposed to give the much-needed economic relief to the family.

The 1820s were not easy times for UP's rural society—"the textile industry was a major component of artisan production and probably accounted for between 20 to 30 per cent of the total artisan population of towns and villages. Perhaps 60,000 specialist weavers lived in the Benaras region, 2,50,000 in Awadh, 200,000 in Rohilkhand and 30,000 in lower Doab. Production of the highest quality was designed for royal and aristocratic consumption and for export by the East India Company... Benaras was famous for saris and brocaded work, and there were spots of high quality work in the Awadh weaving belt around Tanda—Mau and Chanderi near Jhansi were places which rose to prominence as cloth producers on the back of a raw cotton boom[5]."

By the nineteenth century rich markets like Delhi and Agra had collapsed. But "besides the rapid growth of Lucknow and Fyzabad, there was also...a very strong demand for Awadh cloths in Farukhabad, the Maratha territories and even distant Rajasthan. So strong was this demand that from the western merchants indeed that the East India Company found it necessary to use its political power in the Lucknow Court to secure a monopoly on the production of Awadh weavers at Tanda and Aliabad[6]."

Tanda falls within Akbarpur Tehsil; its flourishing industry was alive when Mangal Pandey was born. The village society of Surhurpur was middle class if not prosperous—Divakar Pandey in fact represented the typical enterprising peasant till then not racked by a high revenue demand.

Unlike the rest of Uttar Pradesh, Awadh was still an independent entity. Its citizens were proud of this fact, as they were wary of the East India Company's intentions. Traders and peasants alike had suffered in areas where the Company had taken over the administration directly. There seemed to be, in fact, a reverse logic in the Company's evolution—it started off as a trading article. Then with the passage of time it began acquiring territories to 'protect its trading interests'. But the acquisitions soon turned into loot, which undermined production and manufacture; then the administrative question appeared. Under native rule—even the post Mughal regimes and small *rajadoms*—there was a direct link between trade and revenue. The revenue extracted from the peasantry from the state was ploughed back in the form of buying back of village and artisan produce. Since the jajmani system of exchange prevailed in most parts of the Upper Ganges or the Indo-Gangetic[7] plain, buying back by the state in luxury consumption and essential commodities to feed its bureaucracy and its army led to the rotation of exchange and money within the village society. Mangal Pandey's father would habitually bring home a cow every year, purchased from the produce from his land. He used to give lavish parties, especially on Holi and Diwali, where Mangal saw damsels dancing in twilight[8]—damsels which later appeared to him in the 1850s like ghosts sucked dry of blood.

Mangal's society was also composite—he had Nakki Khan, a boy of his own age, the son of the village Maulvi as his friend. Muslims came over to his house regularly—they were welcomed with open arms and fed non-vegetarian food in separate dishes. Divakar Pandey took Mangal to various Muslim fairs held at dargahs; Mangal's sister who was to die later in the 1830s famine[9] was fond of bangles and her favourite were the red and green ones very popular at the dargah of Ghazi Baba in district Bahraich.

It was in Bahraich that Mangal saw a display of British cruelty—his age is not clear but the times were of want and suffering. Nakki Khan had gone to relieve himself in a field when a British officer's horse, chasing a hunt, almost trampled him. The Muslim ran for his life—he was, however, caught and despite Divakar Pandey's pleadings and offerings of money was caned for the 'offence'.

As this instance demonstrates, the British were being 'feudalized' and talibanized in India while their country was being modernized, industrialized and democratized. This contradiction lay at the heart of East India Company's political acquisitions—once it had acquired territory the Company was a state power—by the doctrines of free trade in vogue then the state had no business investing in trade and industry.

Its role was limited to administration and maintaining law and order.

But then, the Company was not a state—it was a trading firm—how could it not trade? The Company acquiring monopolies resolved this dilemma. But the link between revenue and trade was ruptured. Revenue was reserved exclusively for shoring up the state machinery. The Company was a poor buyer. Its trade monopolies might not exist in the same area from where the revenue was being extracted.

In Company acquisition, the Indian peasantry lost out due to heavy revenue demand—the manufactures and traders also lost because they were barred politically from competing. This was perhaps one of the most vicious instruments, an early example of how a foreign power uses indigenous state power to beat back indigenous competition *in the name of free trade policies*.

Mangal's childhood world was far from these heavy thoughts. The Awadh state was still a buyer, albeit a declining one and the *jajmani* system was yet to be torn asunder. Awadh also, as Mangal was to learn, was the most ancient of Indian societies—it carried an ethical responsibility.

The famine of 1830, which claimed Mangal's sister, was a direct result of the closure of indigenous states and markets, the drying up of purchasing power in towns and cities. The administration did not acknowledge the large-scale death and devastation. Divakar Pandey had taken Mangal's sister to a relative's place in Basti district, which shared its border with Awadh. Basti was Company territory—under the Nawabs it was a prosperous trading town in sugar and rice. Then after the withdrawal of Company investment following free trade dogma, Basti's economy collapsed. Divakar Pandey's sister was married in Basti—when he reached her village he found her mad, raving and ranting for food and her husband dead from a mysterious disease.

This disease turned out to be cholera—there were no medicines available as the local Ayurveda doctors had either died or fled and British doctors were of course not available. The local police did not allow Divakar Pandey to venture back to Awadh—the pretext was a massive manhunt launched to apprehend a dreaded bandit—actually a daredevil peasant who had taken to banditry in famine conditions[10]—but there was also a more sinister design. Basti authorities had decided upon a policy of interning outsiders in Basti even if they die in order to block the message of the terrible famine leaking out.

Divakar Pandey could have sneaked out but he preferred to try save his sister. He sacrificed his daughter in the bargain—when he finally returned to Awadh, he proclaimed proudly that he tried his best to help people and did not let a father's affection come in the way of duty—then he broke down and wept bitterly.

Mangal saw his father's humiliation—he told Nakki Khan of a plan to run away to Basti and see the spot where his sister was cremated. He managed to reach the Faizabad border—but before he could proceed, a group of Indian sepoys in red coats stopped him.

Mangal pleaded with them—they would not hear of letting the friends proceed further. An elderly Muslim sepoy gave Nakki and Mangal sweets and drinks—Mangal was highly pleased by the treatment. Then he saw sepoys beating peasants who were trying to cross over to Awadh.

In an instance Mangal was privy to two sides of the sepoys—one section was beating the peasants while the section led by the elderly Muslim tried stopping them. Then bandits appeared from all sides—they exhorted the sepoys to leave the peasants. The sepoys replied they were Company servants bound by their military oath of loyalty and salt.

Mangal saw the Muslim sepoy urging his comrades to be lenient on the peasants. Some of them listened; some didn't. Some wept at their predicament—how were they supposed to perpetrate cruelty on their own brethren? Weren't they also peasants like them?

The sepoy dilemma was to haunt Mangal till death. Later he described the red coats as beautifully clothed, armed men, full of honour and resolve. That day Mangal told his father and Nakki that he would become a sepoy. Divakar laughed but Nakki was grim. He told Mangal that his Maulvi father had denounced all sepoys as British lackeys—the British had conquered India through Indian arms and men, dazzled by the power of the Brown Bess musket and the colour of their suits.

References

1. Still to be found in Akbarpur in a place called 'Misir ka Purwa'—Brahmins till the nineteenth century could change names—this means a Pandey could become a Misra or a Dixit depending on the tasks or the type of *yagna* performed.
2. *Kissa Pande—Sitaram Subedar* (1797-1880), Madhukar Upadhyay, Saaransh Prakashan, 1999, Delhi.
3. Sleeman, *Journey through the Kingdom of Oude in 1849-1850,* vol I and II.
4. Chapter I.
5. *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars: North Indian Society in the age of British expansion*', C.A. Bayly, OUP, 1983, pp.144.
6. ibid.
7. An ancient system refined in the eighteenth century.
8. *Aalha Mangal Pandey*, Awadhi, unpublished.
9. *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars: North Indian Society in the age of British Expansion*, C.A. Bayly, OUP, pp.276
10. *Aalha Mangal Pandey*, the reference here is to Fuzil Ali, an Awadh bandit. See A *Companion to the Indian Mutiny*', P.J.O. Taylor, OUP, 1996, pp.134.

THREE

Mangal Pandey: The New Sepoy

Mangal Pandey entered the East India Company Bengal army in 1849. He was twenty-two, a tall lad, lean and well built. Village anecdotes paint him as a man nine feet tall—this excusable exaggeration, however, conceals the truth. The peasants recruited by the Company as sepoys were mostly unusually tall—so much so that during the 1857 war Scot Highlanders were brought over especially from Britain to match sepoy strength and height. Local perceptions played a great part in victory or defeat—the natives considered sepoys invincible.

Mangal had gone to Akbarpur for some work. There he chanced upon talk of a sepoy detachment marching along the Grand Trunk Road towards Benaras. Mangal reached Kanpur[1] and looked at the impressive parade. Built by Sher Shah Suri and extended by Akbar in the sixteenth century the Grand Trunk ran from Peshawar to Calcutta—it connected the north-west and the east. In 1857 its vital, strategic importance became a major bone of contention between the British and the sepoys.

Mangal was drafted even as he stood looking at the parade. The tendency to draft curious onlookers was rampant as recruiters usually followed the army.

Mangal had no time to rush to Surhurpur to consult his father or Nakki Khan who had become a serious religious scholar. He gave his assent and was admitted; he was asked to report a couple of days later in Allahabad.

Finally when Mangal's decision did reach the village, Divakar Pandey was nonchalant but Nakki Khan was furious. The latter's father was dead and Nakki now led the *namaaz* in the local mosque. The friends had a falling out—for Mangal the issue was not that he was joining a British army. He saw the move as vital for his growth and career prospects.

In the barracks, Mangal came to be known what was increasingly being referred to as the 'new sepoy'. The 1850s were Dalhousie years when the impatient governor general, whose policies like the Doctrine of Lapse[2] led directly to 1857 happenings, was tightening what was widely regarded by British officialdom as a slackening of discipline[3].

There was more than met the eye here—the British themselves had pampered the sepoys. The Bengal army came into existence in the 1750s and since then the tendency was to encourage the feeling of caste exclusive-ness of the sepoys. The policy was to recruit high caste sepoys from the Indo-Gangetic belt and then to encourage their caste and religious identity while clothing and training them in the European style. Most of the recruits came from villages—there the culture was composite where Hindu and Muslims lived together largely in harmony and where the village panchayat, practicing a basic form of democracy had Hindu and Muslim religious leaders on their board.

Communal feelings in villages were rare—the nineteenth century had begun to witness the communal phenomenon, alien to Indians before the onset of British rule. Pre-British India saw several battles between Hindu kings and subjects and Muslim kings and subjects or vice-versa—but everywhere, without exception, Muslims and Hindus fought on both sides even during the religiously charged atmosphere of the Aurangzeb days. The last great Mughal emperor, known for his Islamic zeal gave the maximum number of grants to temples[4] and inducted the maximum number of Hindus in the Mansabdari system.

Post 1757, after the Battle of Plassey, the British started modelling Indian towns on the Calcutta, Madras and Bombay pattern according to caste and religious equations. Earlier the Mughal town was separated not by caste but by profession. In India professional and caste categories were often intertwined but Muslim traders could be found living alongside Hindu counterparts in areas marked for traders. Most importantly, the moral authority of the city rested with the Kotwal and the Mufti. Both offices represented the Mughal state—its administrative ideology separated official positions from religion. This meant that the Kotwal or the Mufti was not seen as representing the religion of the ruler but an impartial adjudicator of Hindu and Muslim personal laws.

On conquering parts of the Indo-Gangetic belt, the British implemented their own model—the Kotwal and the Kazi were dismissed, power shifted in the hands of the impartial British magistrate. The latter figure, however, was totally unaware of local traditions—he did not know for example, how and where Hindus and Muslims had decided to let their processions pass; which mosques or temples were accessible and so on and so forth. The magistrate had no idea of religious and social conducts based on traditional agreements reached in districts. His first reaction was to remain equidistant—but then the district authority was supposed to adjudicate and take part in traditional distribution of rituals and privileges. The next British move was to start interfering with a vigour based on closed perceptions of the 'Hindoo' and the 'Moslem', regardless of traditions.

It is this opportunism, which gave birth to manipulation of 'Hindoo' and 'Moslem' categories and finally to communalism encouraged, and later sponsored, by the British state. In this, the Gangetic belt's changing economy played a vital role. Previously the traders and officials, schooled in Mughal traditions commanded moral authority in towns. Mughal practices were eclectic and flexible—they took into account the specifics of each region and the sentiments of the people. Mughal rule of law was exact, decisive and context bound.

The British established new men in cities—these were mainly Hindu traders/speculators/brokers that had benefitted from the dislocation of the national economy following colonial intervention. The dislocation had wiped out the old elite—in many cases seen in the 1810s in Ruhelkhand and the western Doab, the communal element was virtually introduced by the new largely broker/comprador elite[5]. This figure had no idea of how the old elite had worked with Muslims and what traditions were in place for passing of religious processions and the like. British administrations thus took upstarts as genuine representatives of religious communities—these led directly to communal situations as the upstarts were narrow minded, cut off from customs and people and had their own vested interests to pursue.

It was only in Awadh that the post-Mughal Nawabi kept intact the Mughal moral order. The Hindu-Muslim synthesis elements were indeed enhanced—Nawabs donated temples and Hindu officials built mosques in markets and cities. The British were banned from interfering in social matters. The Awadhian culture was such that more stress on religion made one more secular and tolerant towards the 'other'.

The British were thus fooled by their own game. They had selected Awadh as the recruiting sepoy ground because of the area's conservatism and religious volatility. Following European models the British found religion a conservative force to be applied in times of crisis—it was the general axiom that a religious man would make a good, disciplined soldier untainted by secular diversions like rebellious thoughts and challenging authority.

The British believed in Utilitarian thinking—soon they were to discover the counter productive aspect of caste-religion emphasis.

Initially the sepoys who came from the villages, which had their own Pandit-Maulvi teachers, took their enhanced ritual status casually. *Kissa Pande* is surprisingly bereft of information about the sepoy social power. The treatise, in fact, is a document par excellence of the old sepoy. This figure is marked by nonchalance or a calm acceptance of his position—after traversing the Pindari and the Nepal wars fought in the 1810s, the *Kissa* mentions the Sikh and Afghan escapade. The *Kissa* ends exactly at the point where Mangal Pandey enters the sepoy stage in history.

The older Pande's *Kissa* is carefree. It reflects the romance and adventure of the second generation sepoy—those who enrolled in the first half of the nineteenth century. These figures occupy a mid point position between the eighteenth century half Anglicized, bastardized sepoy and the fully 'nationalist' Mangal Pandey breed.

The native army had been conceived originally as an indigenous force. But in the late 1700s English commanders began to replace the subedars who were reduced to 'drudgery and dirty work'. Indian officers, even of considerable experience and seniority had to serve under the most junior British officers who came to India in large numbers. Cadets and ensigns still in their teens commanded silver-hair old subedars and *jemadars*.

Yet the eighteenth century sepoy army remembered fondly their links with their English officers. Some of them especially of the Clive-Warren Hastings generation commanded awe, produced through a mixture of strict discipline in a foreign tongue and the way in which white officers mixed with their soldiers.

Traces of eighteenth century sepoy life survive in the *Kissa*—the author laments the passing away of an era when the sahibs used to attend nautch parties, dressed in native clothes and laughed and joked with the men. The sepoys themselves were not free from flirting with European life and values acquiring a taste of wine. The bastardization was thus two sided—in the *Kissa* Subedar Pande crosses the black waters, marries an Afghan, Muslim girl. Both the bastardized eighteenth century sepoys and the type represented by Subedar Pande were loyal to the extreme. The colours of their regiments were of great emotional and religious significance. They were invoked as the emblem of military honour—in a ritual driven society even colonial army traditions were ritualized. 'We put our religion in our knapsacks whenever our colors are unfurled', remarked an old subedar of the Madras army in the 1830s[6].

The 'Bharatpoore incident' is symptomatic of a wider trend—the 31st BNI lost its colours during the unsuccessful siege of the Jat state in 1805. The colours were tarnished by gunfire. It was decided to cremate and replace them with new silks in the morning. But the old standards could not be found—then twenty-one years later, the descendants of the 1805 generation came looking for the colours—part of Lord Combermere's expeditionary force they took the fort and drew forth pieces of the old standard and tied them to the new colours.

Pandits blessed the sepoy colours— in fact British thinking moved in an opposite direction. When during Warren Hastings' time a great noise was made about maintaining the caste purity of the sepoys, the Indian red coat's actual behaviour was that of a cultural hybrid. Then during Subedar Pande's time the sepoys were already being labelled as pampered. If the eighteenth century was dominated by Orientalist romanticism about India, the early nineteenth century saw the ascendancy of the Anglicist pragmatism. The sepoy was seen as becoming too self-important, almost a source of an alternative power center in towns and villages.

The British betrayed philistine pontifications—they were the ones who imparted high-caste superiority to sepoys in a way where the latter saw themselves as leaders of indigenous society. This trend then became alarming—so much so that the Anglicist embarked on the course that gave Subedar Pande's *Kissa* the ring of an elegy and fire to Mangal Pandey's devotion.

There is as yet an unsolved mystery about sepoy behaviour, which the Mangal Pandey episode resolves explosively. Eighteen fifty-seven was not a new sepoy mutiny—right from the 1760s the Bengal army was ringed by a series of disturbances. These later spilled over to the Bombay and the Madras armies. The brutal punishment of tying the rebel sepoy to a cannon mouth was devised during an eighteenth century Mutiny.

The 1806 Vellore Mutiny by the Madras army was threatening—it followed a pattern similar to 1857. Sepoy resentment rose first over interference in wearing caste marks—soon Tipu Sultan's sons, captive in Vellore fort were declared rulers as Madras sepoys went on rampage killing their officers and liberating their environs.

Bloodthirsty force was used to quell the Vellore mutiny—then Barrackpore, the scene of Mangal Pandey's defiance faced a serious crisis in 1824-25. Sepoys in hundreds shot in the air, killed a section of their officers and deserted en masse.

The British began to see the Bengal army as a mess and sepoys as spoiled children. There was politics behind this paternalism—ostensibly the disputes were over pay and other allowances given to the sepoys before but slowly being curtailed by the British. In the post-1813 phase, after the successful completion of the Industrial Revolution in England, British policy was directed more towards discouraging trade with India. Free trade policies were nothing but a disguised form of aggressive Imperial capitalism, which sought to destroy the Indian home market. Finding a new market for British goods was of course, a pressing need. But this should not be confused with any victory of market forces in Britain. Tight oligarchy, dominated by the landed gentry, still ruled Britain. The gentry symbolized a fresh element—it drew its power not from feudal rents but commercial extraction of the peasantry.

The English landed gentry evicted a large number of peasants, forcing new production relations, urging the peasants to grow wool and cotton, to be used by the new clothes factories of Manchester. The English gentry had assumed the status of an effective capitalist landlord. The East India Company by contrast, represented the old trading elite, the upstart nabob or oriental rich of the eighteenth century.

The capitalist landed gentry proved to be the most conservative and reactionary social force in Britain's history. Riding on an anti-Napolean, anti-revolution 1810s wave in Europe it dismantled the freedoms won by the European middle classes during the high tide of the American and the French Revolutions.

The English landed gentry outsmarted the traders and kept the far more progressive manufacturing lobby in check. It forced the East India Company to adopt free trade policies as the profits of its farms were linked directly to the sale of finished goods both in the British home market and overseas. In fact British exports to India remained paltry till 1857. It was then the fear of Indian goods inundating the British market that made the landed gentry bear upon British official policy the expansionist Imperial phase, wherein Indian markets was sought to be destroyed so that British industry and its suppliers could profit.

The sepoy world was not that far removed from the complex political economy of the day. Reduction in support to everything indigenous and Indian accompanied the diminishing of British interest in the development of Indian economy. This included sepoy patronage—series of rigorous methods, dubbed moderate and reform oriented by contemporary analysts were adopted. These related to the freezing of the sepoy wage to rupees seven a month from which the soldier had to pay for his horse and saddle. Privileges such as preferential treatment in courts was curbed—gone also was the option of not crossing the black waters and serving abroad. The worst infringement related to interference in caste and religion.

The greased cartridge issue, universally recognized as the event that triggered off 1857 might have had a more real basis than imagined. It was certainly the last straw as far as the sepoys are concerned.

References

1. Mangal's major life incidents are taken from *Aalha Mangal Pandey*, and *Faizabad Ka Itihaas*, two Awadhian tracts.
2. Satara (1849), Nagpur (1853), Jhansi (1854) and Awadh (1856) were major states gobbled up by the British in quick succession.
3. There are several references to the problem of sepoy military discipline in *What Really Happened During the* Mutiny and *The Sepoys and the Company*, Seema Alavi, OUP, 1995.
4. Pictures of Aurangzeb giving land grants to priests are in the BHU museum, Benaras.
5. See *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars*, C.A. Bayly, pp.327-328.
6. *A Companion to the Indian* Mutiny *of 1857*, P.J.O. Taylor, pp. 284.

FOUR

Barrackpore to Barrackpore

Interestingly, a major row over religion broke out in Barrackpore, the place where Mangal Pandey's 34th BHI was stationed. Sixteen miles from Calcutta on the Hoogly river Barracktown had a governor general's residence—Job Charnock, the founder of Calcutta, too lived here for a while and is said to have seriously contemplated building a city here.

The governor general's residence stood in a well-laid out 250 acres park. Barrackpore was an important military cantonment. Major-General Hearsey, a man of some talent and judgement, was the officer in charge. On 23 January 1857 he wrote a letter to the government on the cartridge question: amongst other things, the letter represented to the government the extreme difficulty of eradicating the notion, which had taken hold on the mind of the Indian soldiers. Hearsey urged as the only remedy that the sepoys be allowed to obtain themselves the ingredients necessary to grease the cartridges.

The other important aspect of Hearsey's letter pertained to the influence of Dharma Sabha, a Brahminical association on Barrackpore sepoys. Now this scattered evidence raises some vital questions: were the sepoys in touch with a larger organization? Who represented the Barrackpore Dharma Sabha? If an association really was acting as a political instigator then the greased cartridge issue could not have been merely a temporary, sentimental issue.

Three dispatches, all from Bengal detail the religious issue—

> Monday, March 16 (1857): "There has been a rumor for some days past of an intended mutiny at Fort William. It appeared to have risen from the sulki-ness and insolence of several sepoys who have been placed in arrest. The Harkaru states that the Sepoys put forth as the excuse for their discontent, the idea that the Governor-General has promised the Home Government to convert them all in three years. The

> garrison at Fort William has expressed considerable sympathy with the 19th and the 34th—"
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> Tuesday, March 24, 1857: "The Dacca News reports the beating of a Brahmin by four Sepoys. It appears that the Brahmin had incurred the hatred of the sepoys; he was supposed to be himself a Christian, and to cherish the idea of converting his countrymen to Christianity."
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> Thursday, April 2, 1857: "The conduct of the 34th Regiment at Barrackpore calls forth some strictures from the Englishman, strictures not upon the sepoys, but upon their officers—Lieutenant Colonel Wheeler is quite unfit for his post, because he distributes tracts[1]."

The last mentioned dispatch came four days after the Mangal Pandey episode on 29 March. The constant reference to Mangal's regiment at Barrackpore and the 19th BNI at Behrampore reflects a neglected issue—the concentration of propaganda by the chief Indian brains behind the uprising in Bengal. Mangal, as seen above, was a new sepoy—it is obvious that the level of his sentimental concord with his officers was minimal—unlike Subedar Pande he must have had few sympathetic ears in a regiment dominated by the likes of Lt. Wheeler.

Lt. Wheeler became an offender for trying to evangelize the sepoys. What face off he might have had with Mangal is lost in history books. The *Aalha Mangal Pandey,* however, mentions how Mangal had shouted at a British officer for trying to coax sepoys into listening to missionaries like Rev. M.A. Sherring.

The latter worked in Benaras and later on in Mirzapur. His views throw a very different light on British motives: "The Grand scheme of Missions to the heathen is now being acted on...It is narrow in its dimensions. Still the scheme is widening every day. This country of 200 millions has been claimed by the Church, which has sent thither its ministers, to proclaim throughout its length and breadth the way of redemption through Christ. ...Christian institutions have sprung up...there is a scarcely a Hindoo or a Mahommeden who has not heard of Christ. ...The whole land has been shaken by missions to its innermost centre. The Hindoo trembles for his religion, the Mahommedan for his....he acknowledges the fact, and predicts the downfall of his own religion and the triumph of Christianity"[2].

Elsewhere pro-British journals were harping on the same theme: "Is it nothing that at this very moment in the jungles of Chota Nagpore, among a race wild as out painted forefathers, three thousand men have declared their eagerness to be baptized. It has been evident for years to all men with eyes that the old fabric of Hindooism is breaking up...[3]"

The British actually saw the slow build-up of sepoy power and its disaffection. It was as if the structure they had constructed was becoming too powerful, moving away from them. All later measures to tone down the Bengal army were measures to arrest the drift. But the remedies became causes for further unrest.

The British had replaced the declining Mughal Empire with a form of colonial military despotism. The army was there not just to defend the frontiers—its primary role as in any military despotism was to pacify the inner conflicts. That is why the Bengal army was used to eliminate the Pindaris and later to crush the Santhal rebellion.

But military despotic regimes have their own logic—dissent is suppressed, political parties are banned and associations represent mainly the interests of the gentry. Pre-1857 India had many such associations—the Bengal landlord association was notorious for its slavish worship of British interests. Bombay and Madras associations too were dominated heavily by traders and landlords and had no interest whatsoever in articulating any demands.

In the British scheme, the Indo-Gangetic public virtually had no room for dissent. Even in Awadh the old structures had broken down, as the British pressed the Nawabs for setting up courts based on the English model. The sepoy army in fact was the only outlet left to articulate discord of any form.

The problem with letting a military work as the only form of indigenous platform has worked wonders elsewhere for colonialism. The army by nature is an authoritarian institution and rarely tips towards expressing views. But the Indian situation was radically different.

The notion in fact of British invincibility and their control of the Indian army through sheer strength of a superior European personality are all Imperialist racial myths. The simple fact of the matter is that the British found the eighteenth century chaotic but power could not be picked up from the streets just like that. The British could not import white soldiers and native recruits were sitting to be enrolled.

The eighteenth century and its retelling, mainly by British scholars, had hidden an important fact. Mysore and Marathas states were rivals to the expansion of British power; they too had started a modernization drive, shifting focus away from the cavalry driven Mughal pattern to the infantry led European one. In Mysore and Maratha states recruits were increasingly peasants—the Mughal *sowar* of noble birth was a thing of the past.

Recruitment for a British army was not easy. Therefore an elaborate system of bargaining and inducements was evolved—the Bengal army, in effect had become a huge armed trade union by the eighteenth century. There were clear-cut dos and don'ts and a system of informal rules, which everyone had to follow.

So despite India being turned into a colonial military despotism with the Bengal army as its most effective arm, there was plenty of room for dissent articulation. The sepoys not only bargained on their behalf but the peasantry as well—*Aalha Mangal Pandey* has a whole page devoted to how

Mangal and his comrades settled a number of disputes overturning on a number of occasions judgements issued by the courts.

In one such incident Nakki Khan approached Mangal, who was on furlough, for help. Nakki Khan's uncle was based in Kanpur. A poor peasant, he had taken a huge sum from an outsider Bania, a Sood from west UP for marriage. The uncle had defaulted and the Bania took him to court. Mangal went personally and had the Bania, who was impressed by his height and position in the army, withdraw the case. Then the local magistrate heard—he called the Bania and the Sood 'trembling like a leaf before the officer' narrated the tale. The officer, a particularly vicious character went ahead and opened Nakki Khan's uncle's files—the latter was found to be in arrears of land revenue.

The Bania was back in the village with a police force. Nakki Khan's uncle was tied to a tree and caned. The police beat him with boots. Till then the uncle did not know that the British land revenue demand was not based on produce but on the size of the landholding and other extraneous factors. The demand itself was high much in advance of the one-sixth of the produce, paid to the Mughals.

Nakki Khan's uncle's plight recalls the total peasant stupefaction in face of colonial laws. The court language had become Urdu (from Persian) in 1836 but the judges, most of them white skins preferred to deal in English.

Mangal was leaving for Barrackpore when Nakki contacted him again. He accompanied his friend to Kanpur and reached just when the police were untying the half dead uncle.

Mangal took out his sword—there was an altercation in which two policemen lost their lives—the district officials ran when Mangal began loading his musket. Soon the villagers came out and the entire official party was held hostage. The Bania was nowhere to be seen.

The Kanpur magistrate created a lot hullabaloo but Mangal, and this is instructive, was not punished. Instead his status as a sepoy was recognized and there was a proper bargaining. Far from being charged of the murder of two policemen, Mangal was let off, as if he did not exist, from the affair—then he became the unofficial go-between man—he worked out a proper deal for Nakki's uncle, including some leniency in land revenue assessment and collection.

The incident demonstrates the tenuous British hold and the fact that even simple dissent could take a bloody form under a military despotism. This fact is very important in trying to understand Mangal's March conduct in Barrackpore—beyond a point things were settled with a show of arms.

The Lt. Wheeler episode exposed the Church-State interface: "The last three centuries have witnessed the coalition of the Church and the State almost throughout the Christian World. And what has been the result of the Union?

In some countries as in France it has destroyed religion; in others, as in Ireland, it has paralyzed civil power. Everywhere else it has rivetted the chains of tyranny upon the subject people. Nowhere has it served the cause of human happiness. Nowhere has it allowed religion to exercise its tutelary influence on the human condition, the influence, which it never fails to exert when unhampered by a connection with the temporal power. The Indian Church establishment is an abuse and a growing abuse. It has taken deep root in the constitution of the State......".

...Compare the present magnitude of the establishment with its strength at earlier period. In 1806 there were chaplains on the

Bengal Establishment	11
Madras Establishment	06
Bombay Establishment	04
Total	21

The ecclesiastical establishment in India, as it now stands, is as follws:

	Bishops	Archdons	Chaplains	Total
Bengal	1	1	71	73
Madras	1	1	35	37
Bombay	1	1	30	32

The Indian state paid clergy have multiplied sevenfold within the last half century and the Bishop of Calcutta still considers a Bishop of Agra the carrying want of India. The party which has charged India with this encumbrance has lost nothing of its power or influence over the administration of the affairs of this empire, and the carrying want will, no doubt soon to be attempted to be supplied at our cost[4]."

The fact that there was still no Bishop of Agra is significant—a city of great importance in the Indo-Gangetic belt was to prove a test case of the battle of religion and ideas in the 1850s.

What was really at stake here? Pro-British papers were forthright: "*The Bombay Times* recognizes in the present mutinies simply the commencement of the great battle between Christianity and Caste. This battle has been impending ever since the English arrived in India, and those who admitted high Brahmins into the army have settled as the battlegrounds the ranks of the army. They, not the missionaries, have converted the battle into Christianity versus the army. The only cure is, instead of making the army a great Brahmin machine for perpetuating the distinctions of caste, to make the Brahmin become a caste-less servant of the state. The whole struggle is Christianity versus Brahminism not Christianity versus the inhabitants of India[5]."

This amazing tract reveals the finer contours of the 1857 conflict—it clearly shows the use of Christianity as a subtle ideological weapon by the state. Open conversions were a crude form of this policy. The more insidious ploy was to rid the country of what the British called Brahminism.

The East India Company commanders had already subjugated Indian rulers and broken the power of the Indian bourgeoisie—now they wanted to kill the ideological identity of the Indian people. The Brahminism targeted above was very much welcomed, as the tract admits by the British earlier as a form of control over native society. Why was it suddenly a threat?

Brahminism was a threat because the British wanted to follow the Goa pattern. Here high caste Hindus had converted to Christianity and the old status quo had merged into a new religion creating an effective base for the Portuguese administration. The British wanted Brahmins as partners—making them the administrative equivalents of the comprador traders and bourgeoisie.

In India the British found, particularly in the Gangetic belt both Islam and Sanatan Dharma, mistakenly termed as Brahminism, as 'intransigent' religions and socio-political discourses. They took up the issue of caste thinking it would rupture Sanatan Dharma. But caste proved too sophisticated a weapon to handle and the Brahmin too shrewd an adversary to be won over.

The Indian caste system was orthodox and flexible—moreover, the status of the Brahmin as the leader of the village society was something that all castes accepted. In many ways the Brahmin was the wise old man respected by all—then there was his alliance with the Muslims.

Indian village life was one large community where distinctions and solidarity both were strictly observed. Individuals from other castes were given due respect. But there was one other factor.

Indo-Gangetic villages were militarized—the person who carried arms—even a Shudra could command leadership. This was not coarse feudal ethic but a refined way of thinking enshrined in the scriptures: 'Veer Bhogya Vasundhara'. It is to be noted that there was no mention of a Brahmin or any exclusive caste Bhogya Vasundhara. It is a general statement given to eulogize valour.

The Indo-Gangetic Brahmin, once he acquired arms as a Bengal army sepoy, was now both a *veer* and a *gyaani*—in effect a warrior and an ideological preacher. He saw British rule as a temporary stop-gap measure. In the Brahmin world-view cultural superiority over the white skin was a given—he had ancient scriptures to quote how the Mauryas had driven the Yavanas (the Greeks) back. If the Greeks could be defeated then surely the British could be ejected.

In the Brahmin the Anglo-Saxons met their match—here was a figure they could not bend, who had an ancient tradition, mandate from heaven and a genuine regard for the poor, the *Daridra Narayan*. He was neither vainglorious nor an arm chair liberal. The Brahmin had brain and brawn—

he also had a notion of universal power, stringy and adaptable to modern nineteenth century conditions.

Mangal Pandey's era of the 1850s witnessed a heightened period of activity, an assertion of indigenous culture. This can be seen in the evolution of Awadhian Nawabs. Ghaziuddin and Nasiruddin Haider who ruled in the 1820s and the 1830s were known for their adoption of western dress and manners—Nasiruddin had a whole fashion house, which blended the French half sleeve with the Indian blouse[6].

Amjad Ali Shah and Wajid Ali Shah—rulers in the 1840s and 1850s—went back to native culture. The shift is crucial—it provides an understanding of Indian cultural trends and moods.

The element of change and continuity, so common to past breaks and sharp innovations in Indian culture, was paramount in Wajid Ali Shah's experiments. Peasant cultural empowerment had to lead to peasant political empowerment. Mangal Pandey's actions in Barrackpore therefore gave an acute turn to a process already underway—the shots fired from his musket on the fateful day announced the coming of age of the Indian peasantry.

In Mangal's personal story, the *Aalha* speaks about his break up with Nakki Khan sometime in late 1856. The involvement of a girl is vaguely mentioned but then the friends are shown as patching up—the major fallout seems to have occurred when Nakki Khan informed Mangal of new thoughts blowing in the wind.

Apparently Nakki, who had become a Sufi as well, had come fresh from a religious fair where he had heard Hindu and Muslim saints venting anger at British rule, spelling out its doom in 1857, exactly hundred years after the Battle of Plassey. At first Mangal was livid and refused to entertain rebellious thoughts. The British were his masters and he had eaten their salt. Nakki, however, pointed out the discriminations, especially how the sepoys are no longer treated with the same awe in villages. Mangal was still adamant—he would not hear of raising his gun against the *phirangi.*

The encounter is mentioned as having taken place in Barrackpore itself. Other references also point out the presence of a large number of fakirs and sadhus in Behrampore and Barrackpore right on the eve of disturbances.

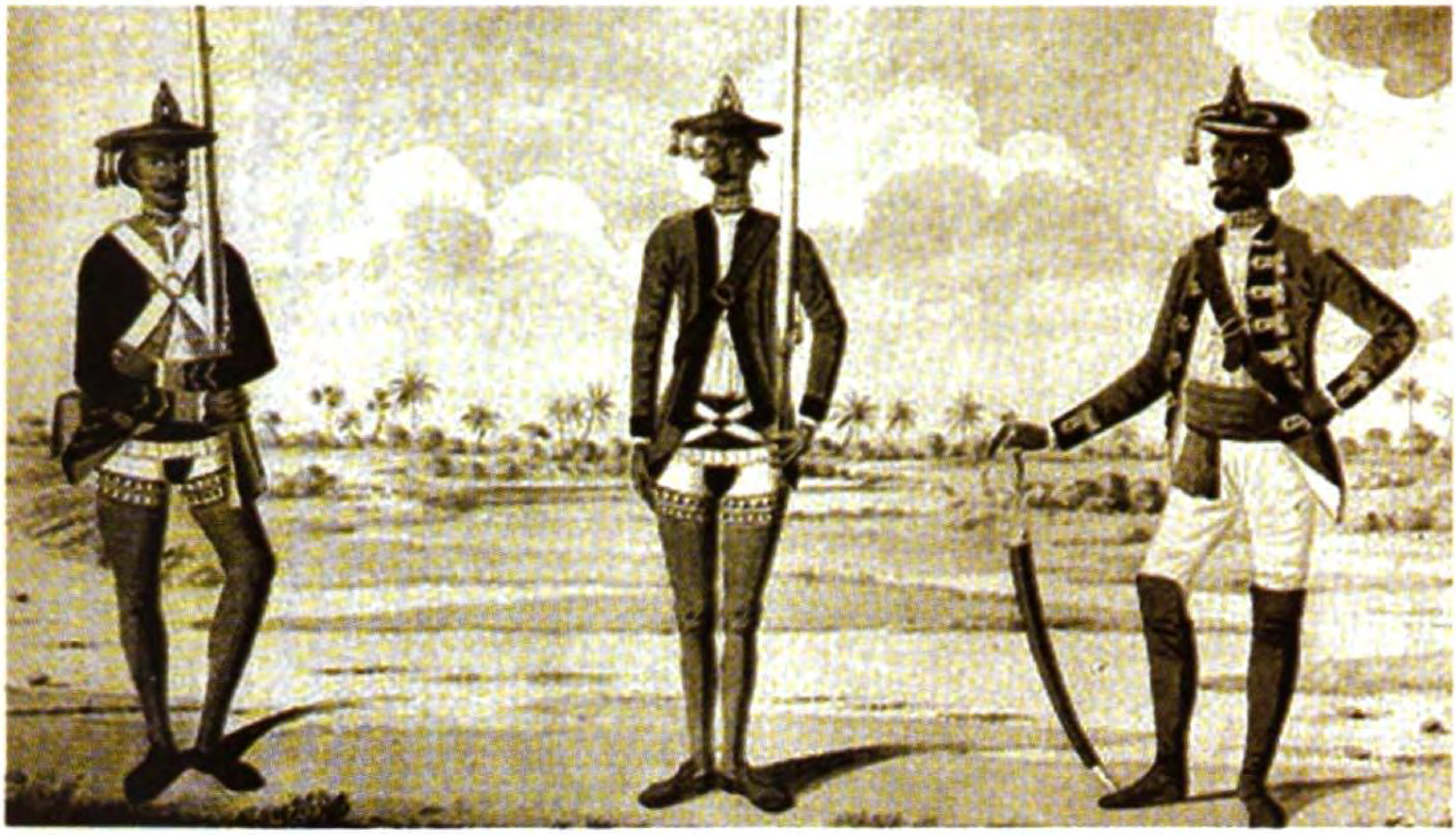
Testimonies and facts support the fact that there was a huge group of religious personnel involved in the 1857 propaganda. Dassa Bawa, the spiritual guru of Nana sahib, the Peshwa of Bithoor was said to have been the major force behind the religious mobilization. Another group constituted saints from north India and the Himalayas. The Jat Sarva Khap literature reveals several such assemblies in religious fairs like Haridwar where both Hindu and Muslim fakirs. Agents of Nana Sahib, Azimullah Khan and Tantya Tope, Rani Lakshmi Bai and Kunwar Singh, Nahar Singh of Ballabgarh, all major 1857 players were present.

Two distinct forces mobilized religious elements. A major trend comprised the revolutionary Maulvi tradition, leading an underground movement similar to many latter day Marxist impulses. These were the Walliullah-ites—Hindus too were members of their radical Islamic network, which the British mistakenly termed Wahabi. The second group was made up of Sanatan Dharmi saints—they set up several front organizations like the Barrackpore Dharma Sabha and steered clear of all Bengal based orthodox Hindu movements.

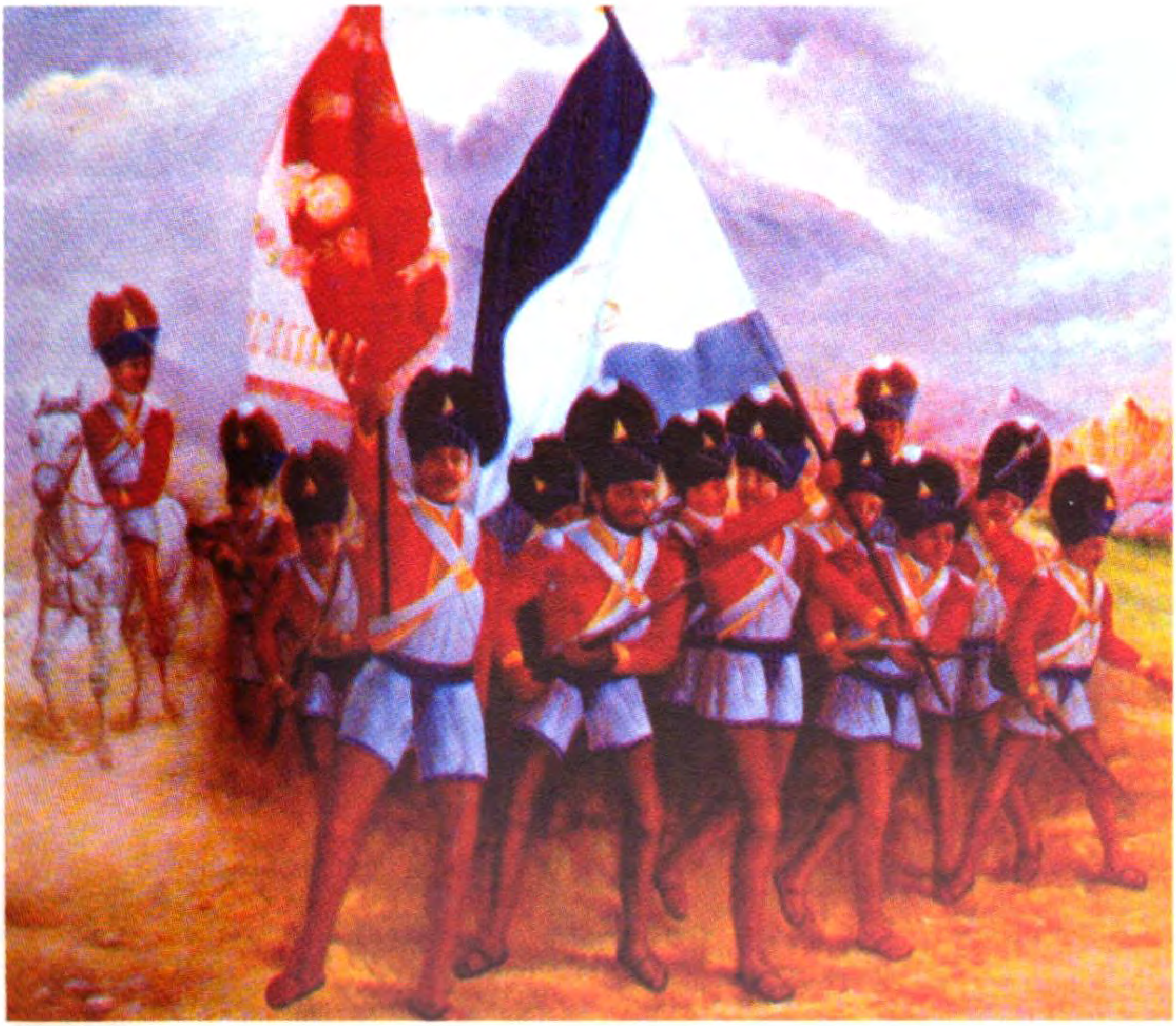
Prior to 1857, a dispute over the Sanatan Dharma category had emerged—the British had encouraged the use of this term and the Calcutta orthodox elements had followed suit. The north Indian Sanatan Dharmis, however, along with a number of Marathi West Indian saints argued that Hinduism is no religion—Hindu itself was an Arab category applied to inhabitants of land beyond the Sindh and as such had no religious connotation.

Nakki Khan was probably a Walliullah-ite—the *Aalha* comes close to suggesting that he was the go-between Sanatan Dharmis and Muslims. He was certainly parked in east India. His travels are recorded as covering the entire stretch from Jorhat in Assam to Murshidabad in West and Dacca in East Bengal.

Bengal had a great tradition of Walliullah-ite activities—the revolt of Dudu Miyan and Titu Mir was still fresh. Nakki Khan travelled as a salesman for a British opium firm. His method was to contact the core group of three to four sepoys, inform them of Gangetic belt activities and pass on. Nakki Khan was particularly adept at propagating the drain of

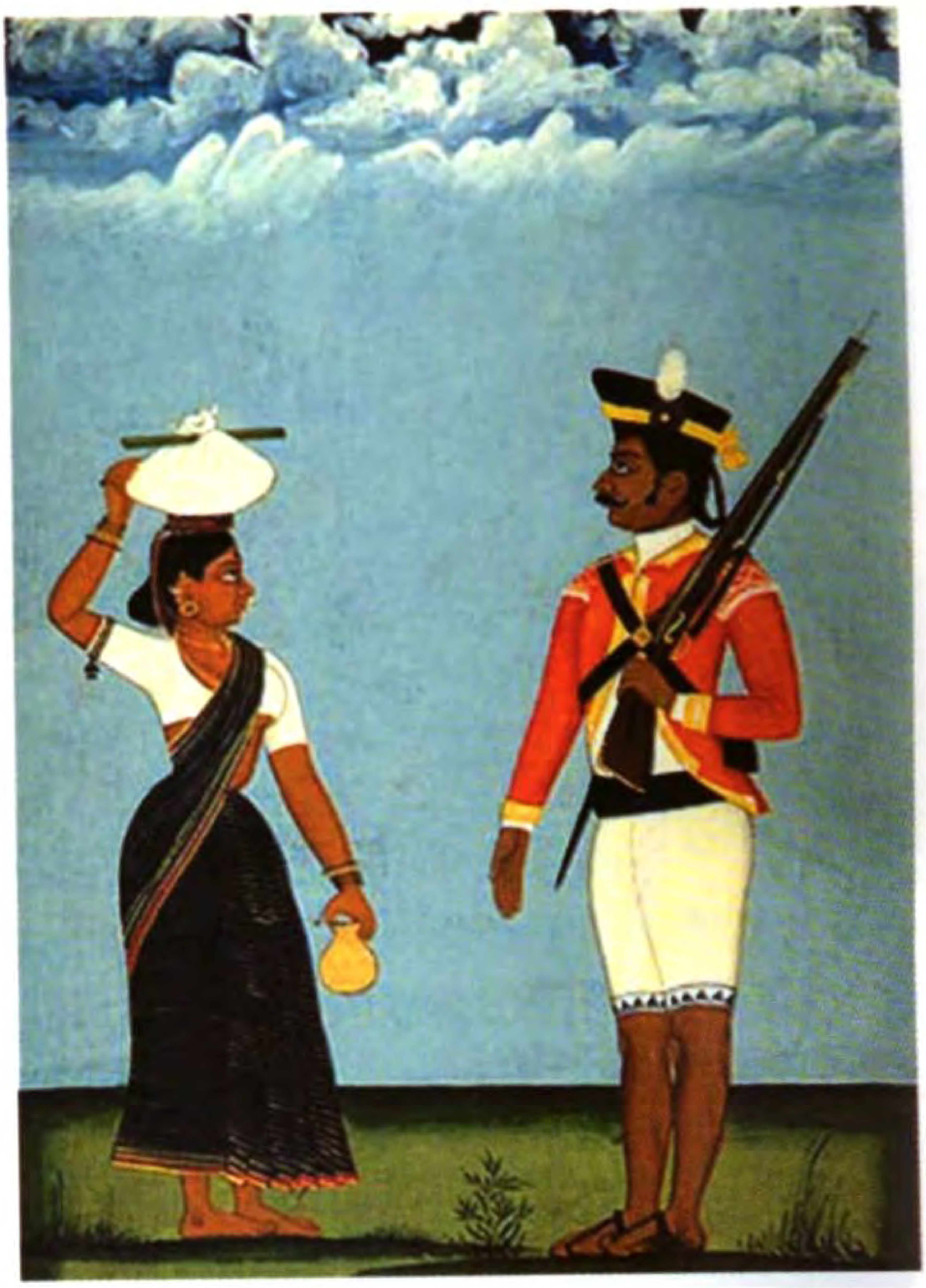


Sepoys in uniform, late eighteenth century.

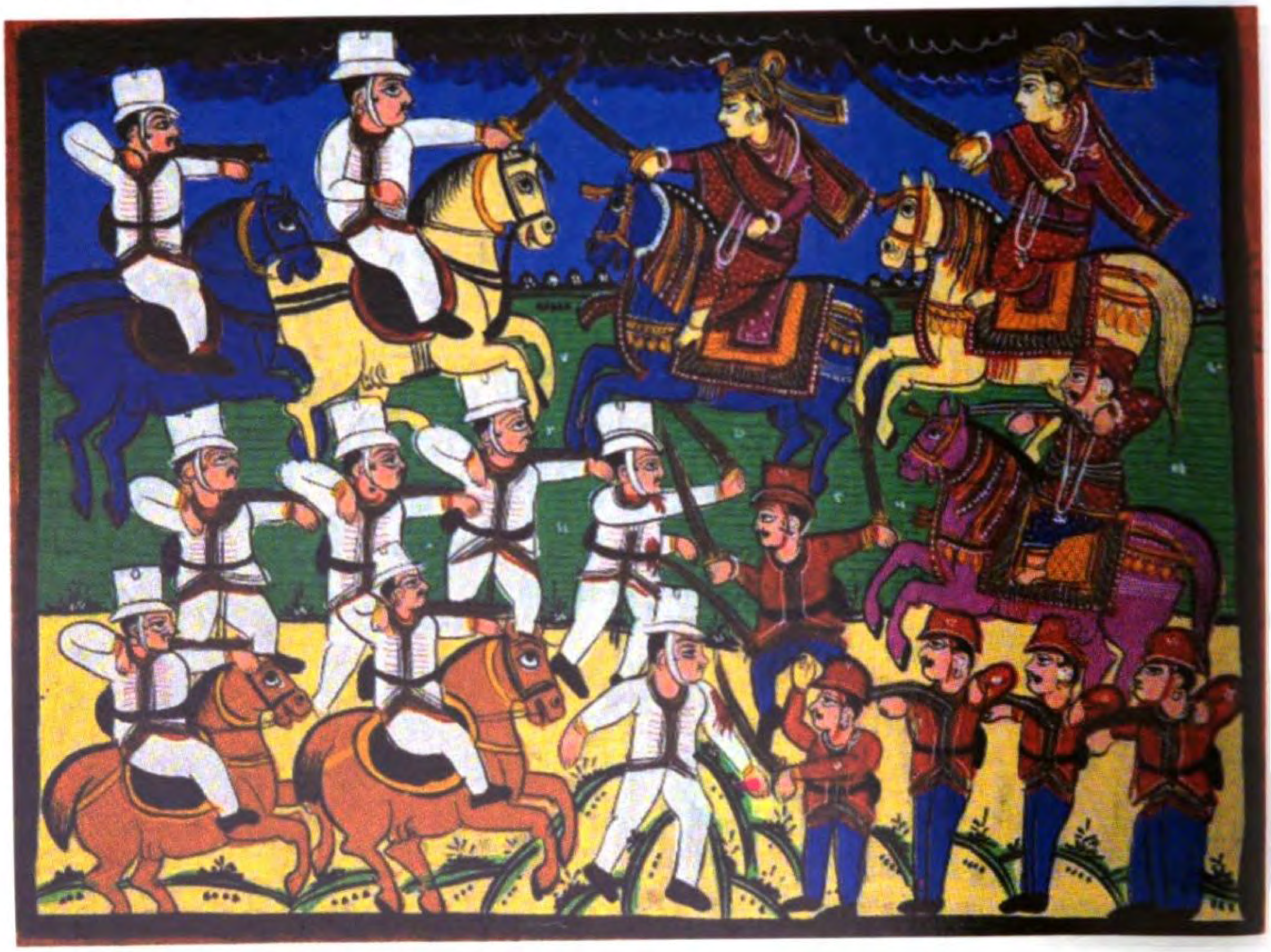


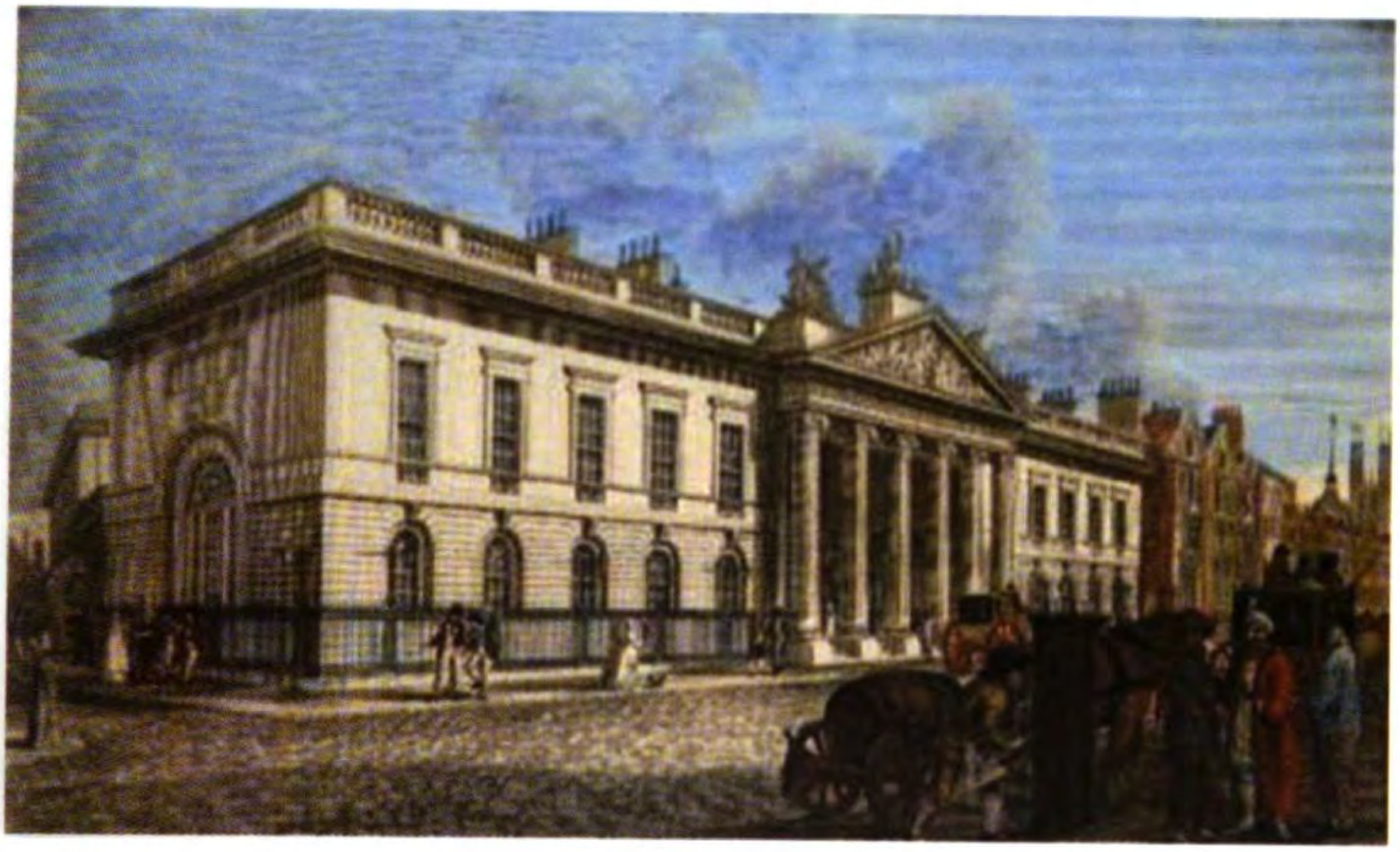
English sepoys, late eighteenth century.

An 1850s Indian sepoy with his wife.

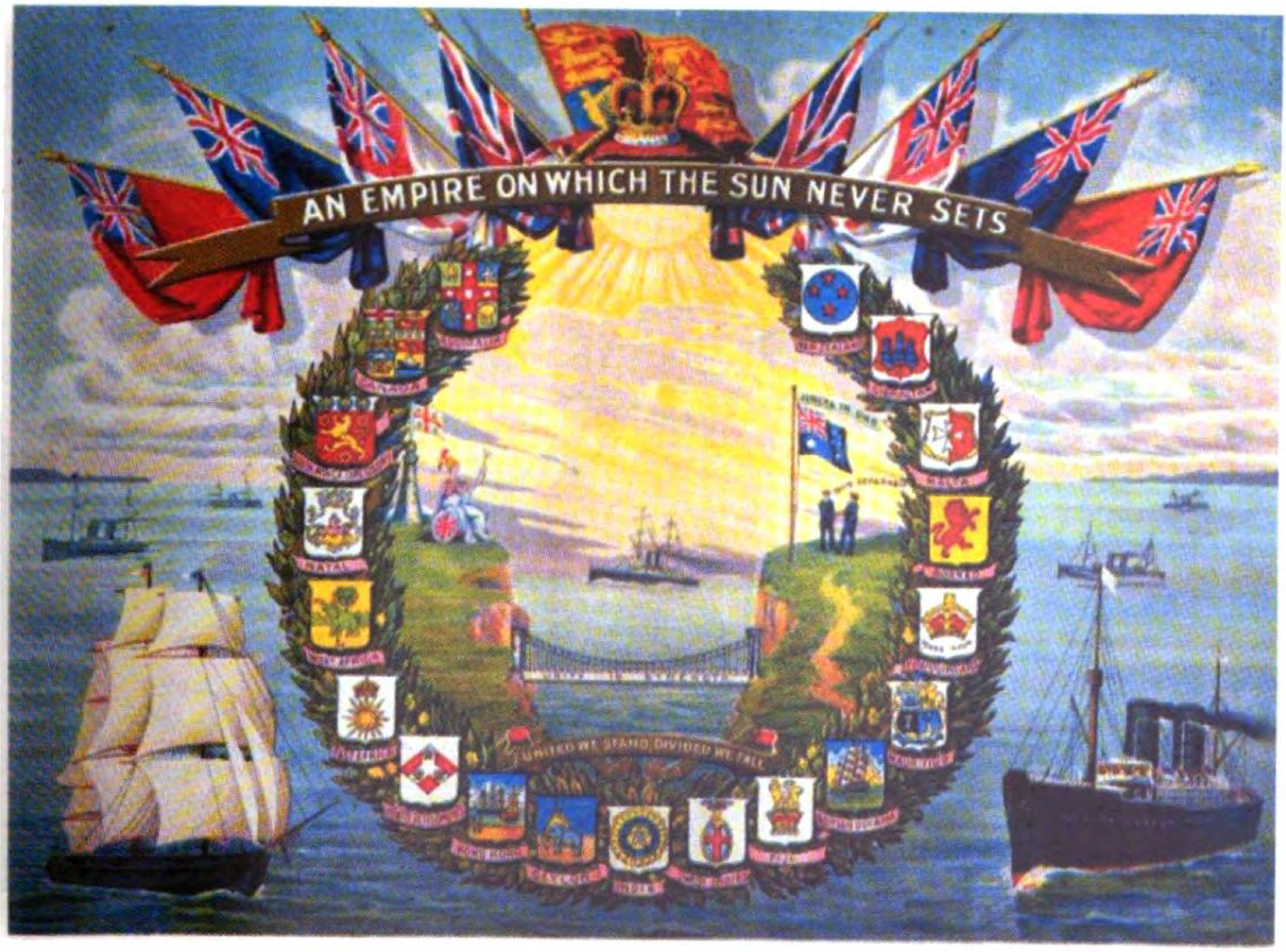


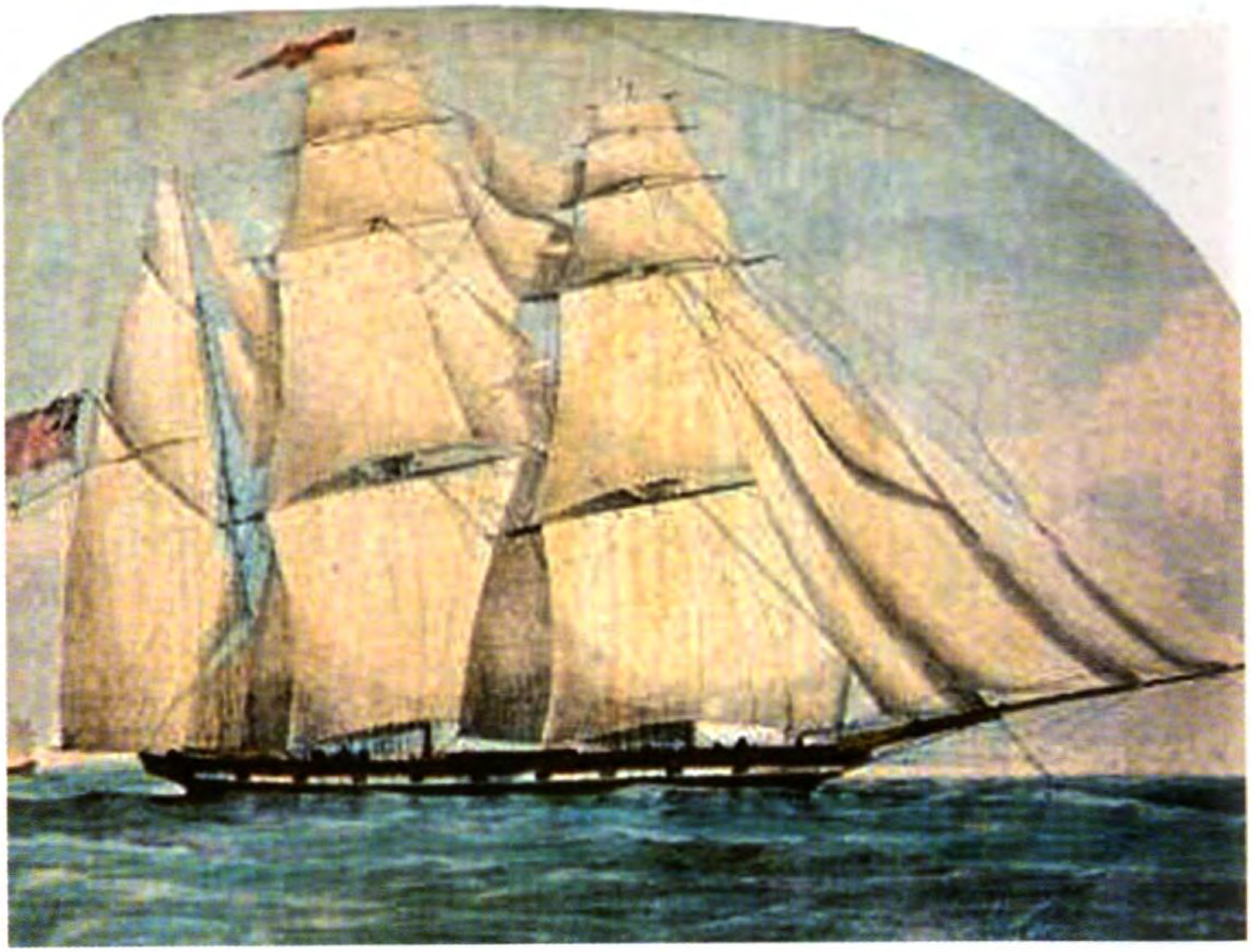
An artist's rendition of a general mutiny scene.



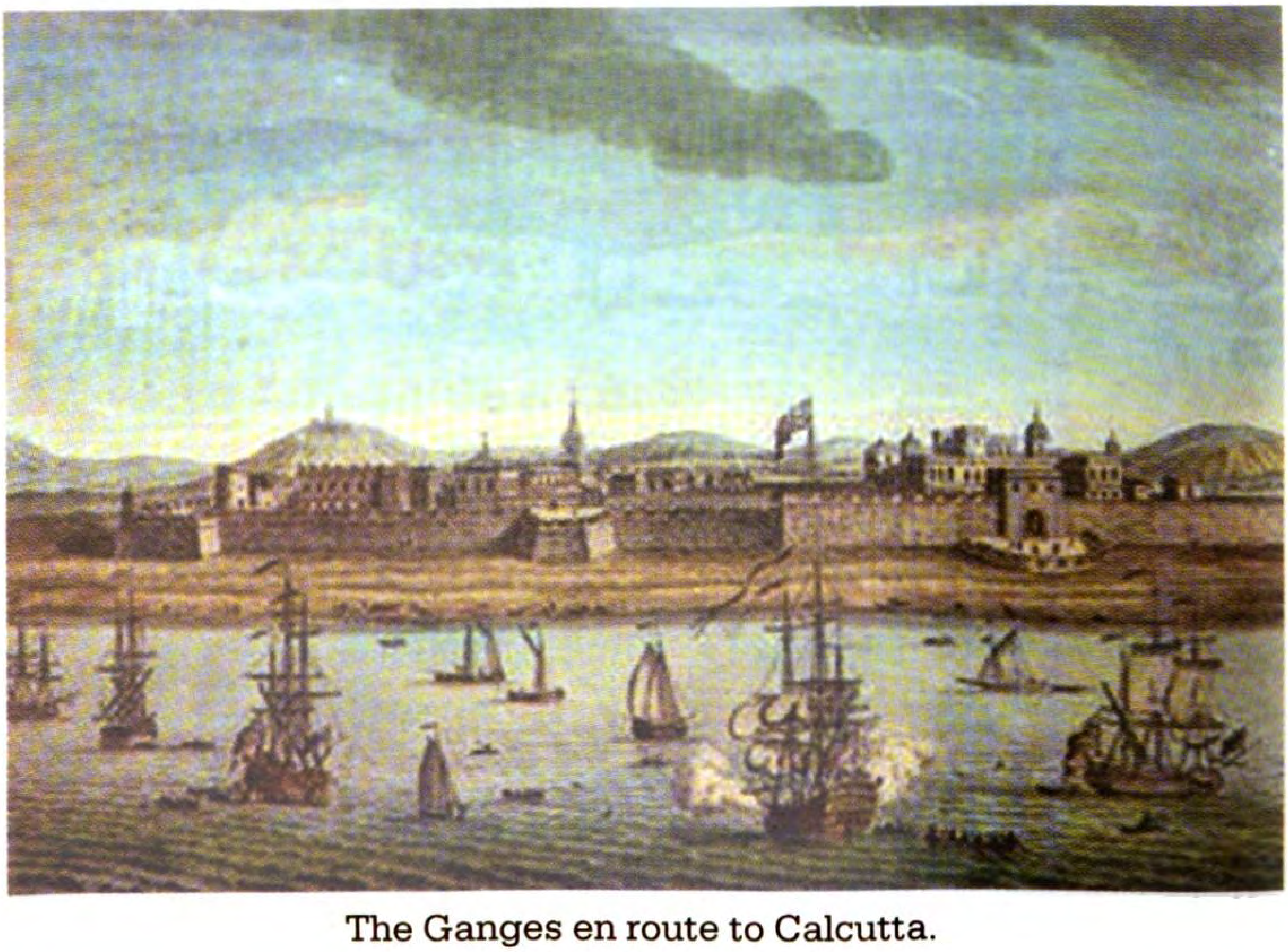


East India House.

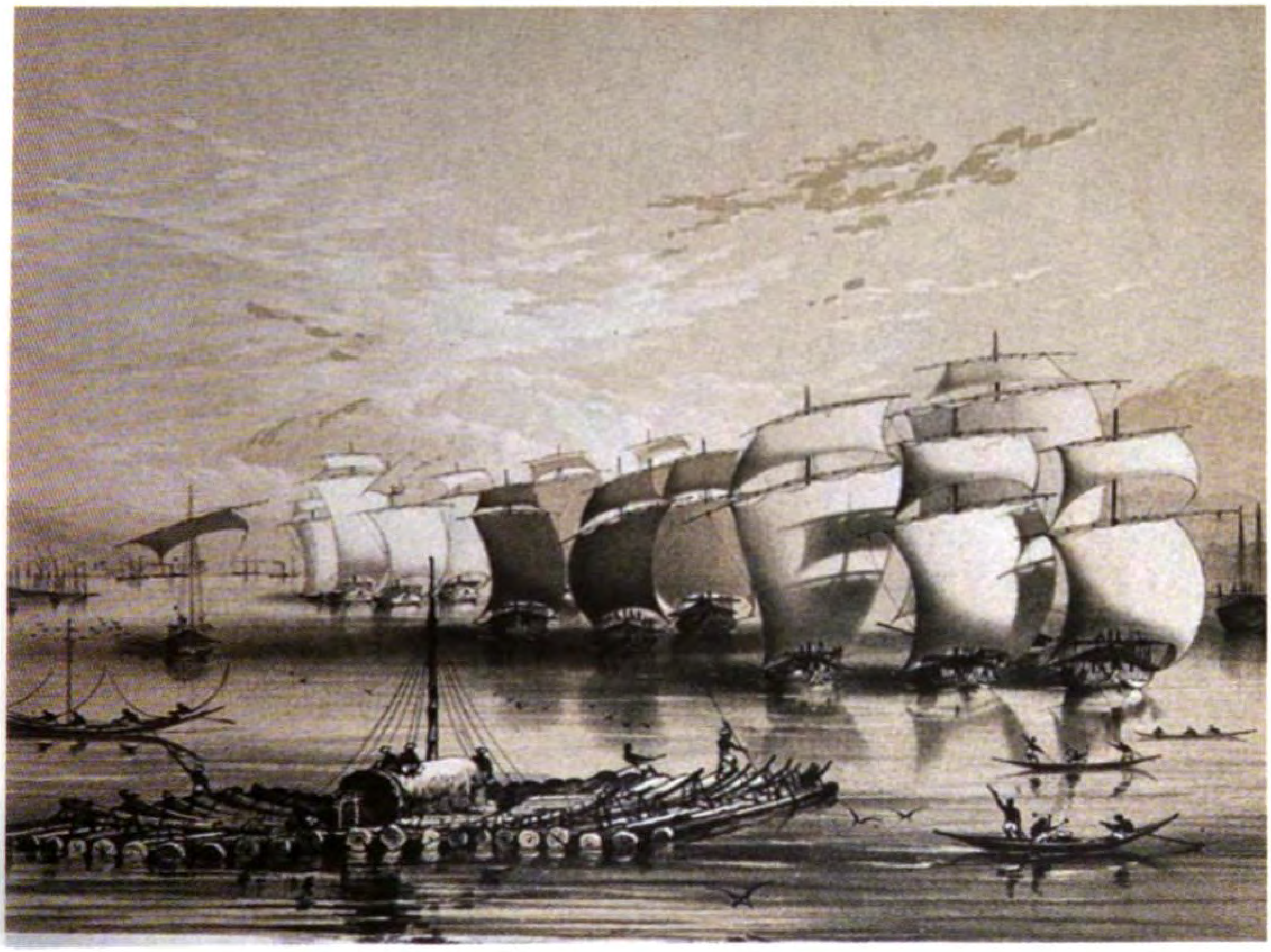

AN EMPIRE ON WHICH THE SUN NEVER SETS
CANADA
NATAL
MALTA
UNITED WE STAND, DIVIDED WE FALL
HONG KONG
CEYLON
INDIA



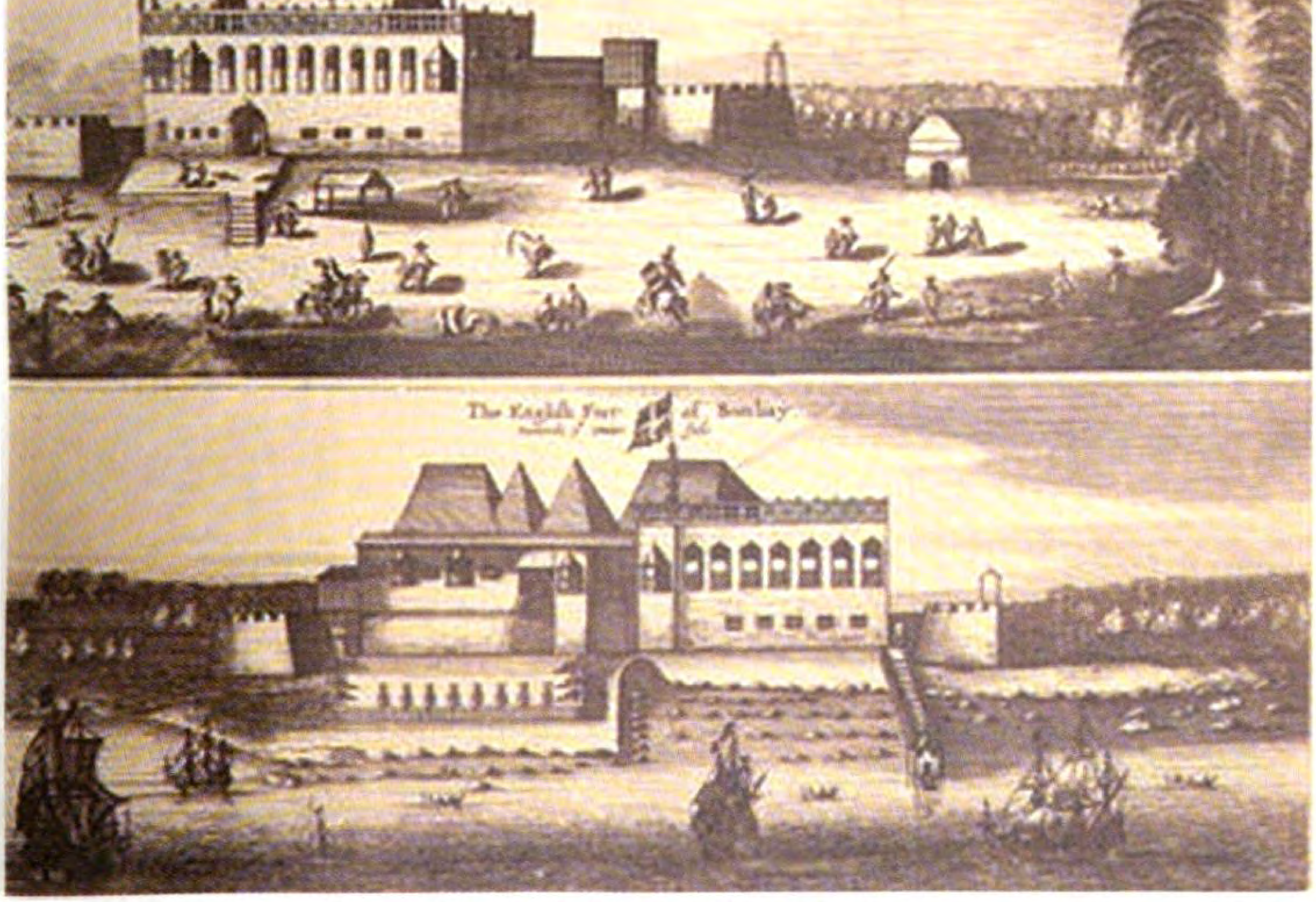
Opium clipper.



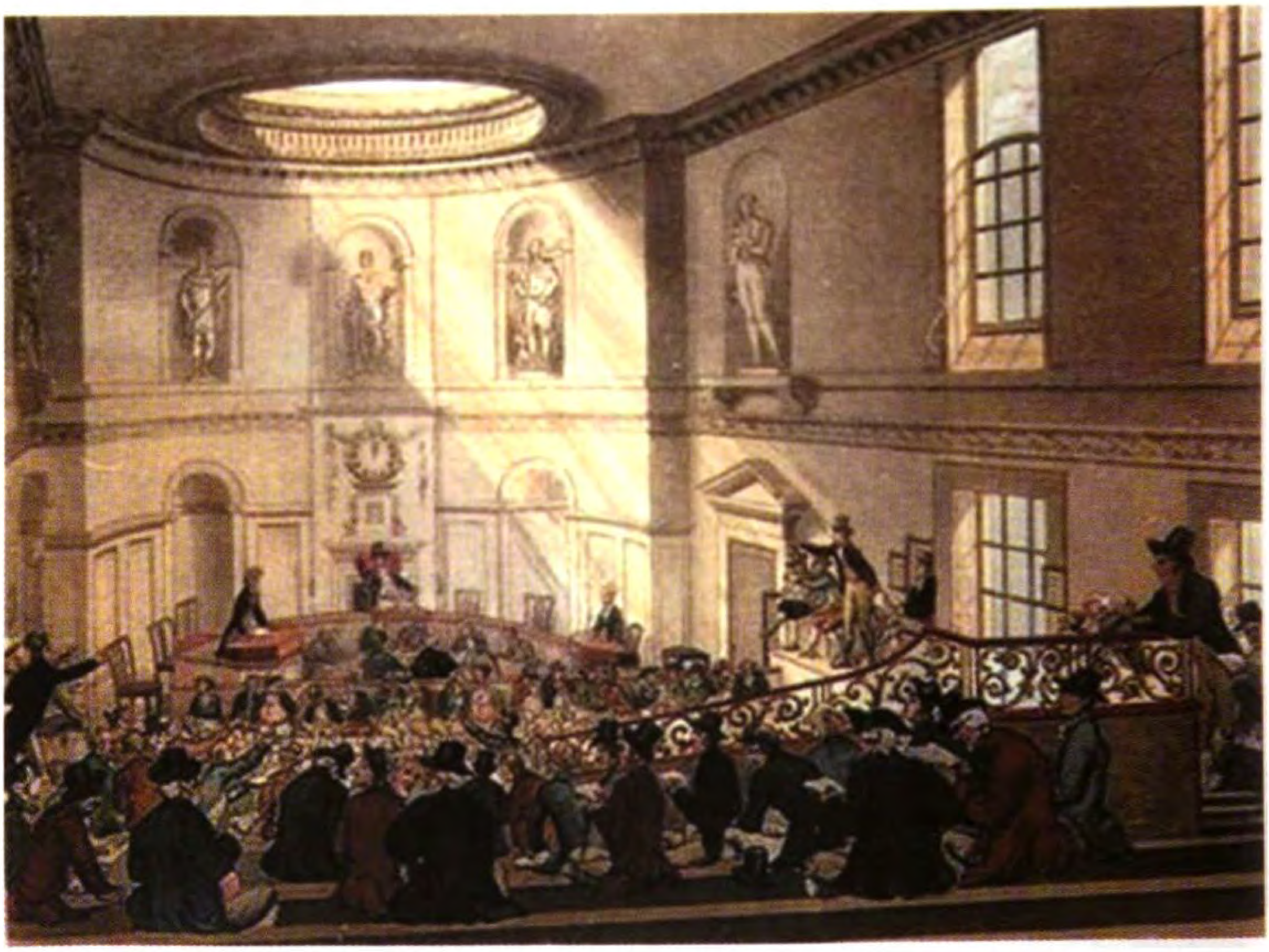
The Ganges en route to Calcutta.



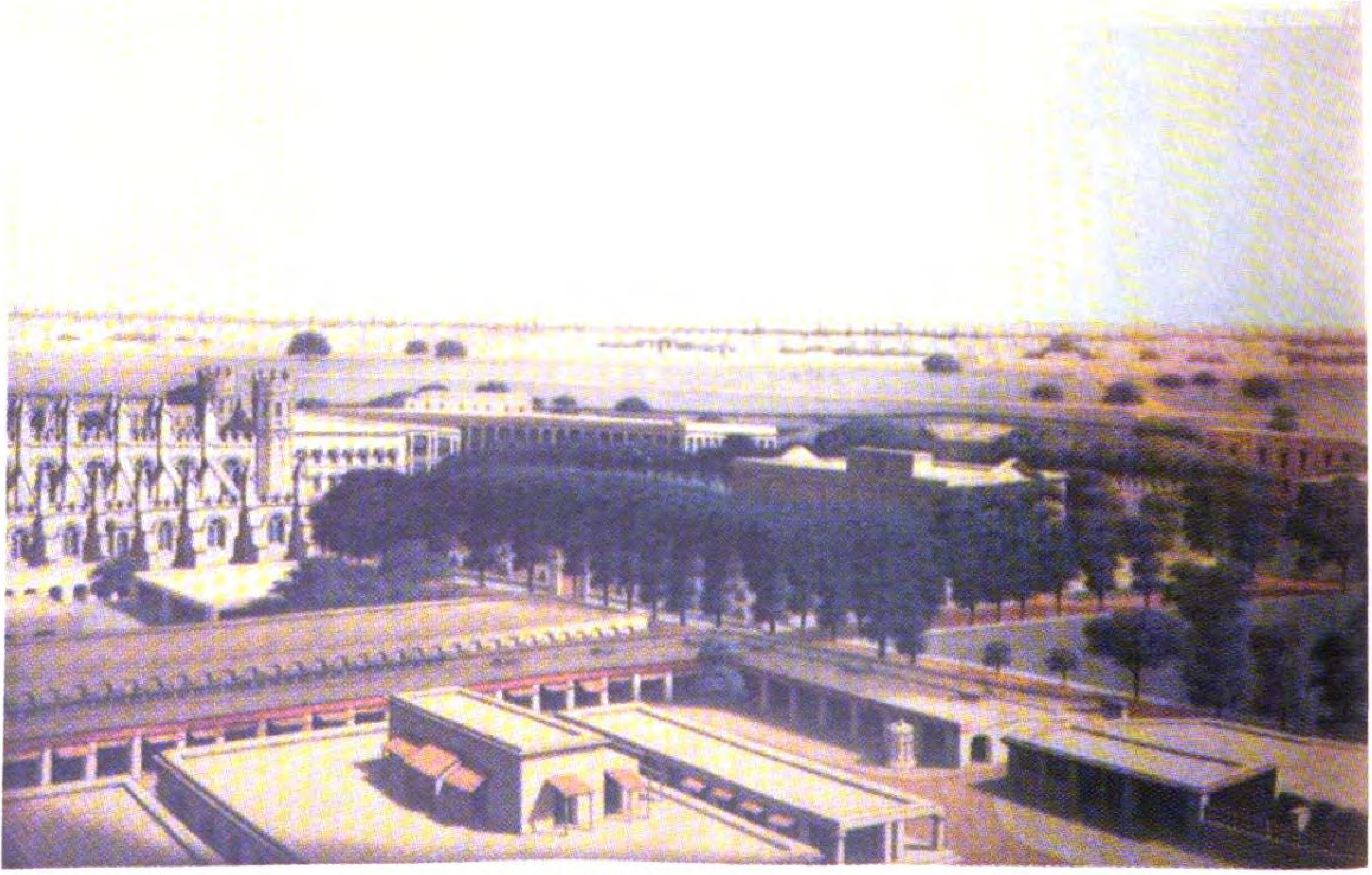
Fort St. George, Madras.


The English Fort of Bombay
The English Fort of Bombay

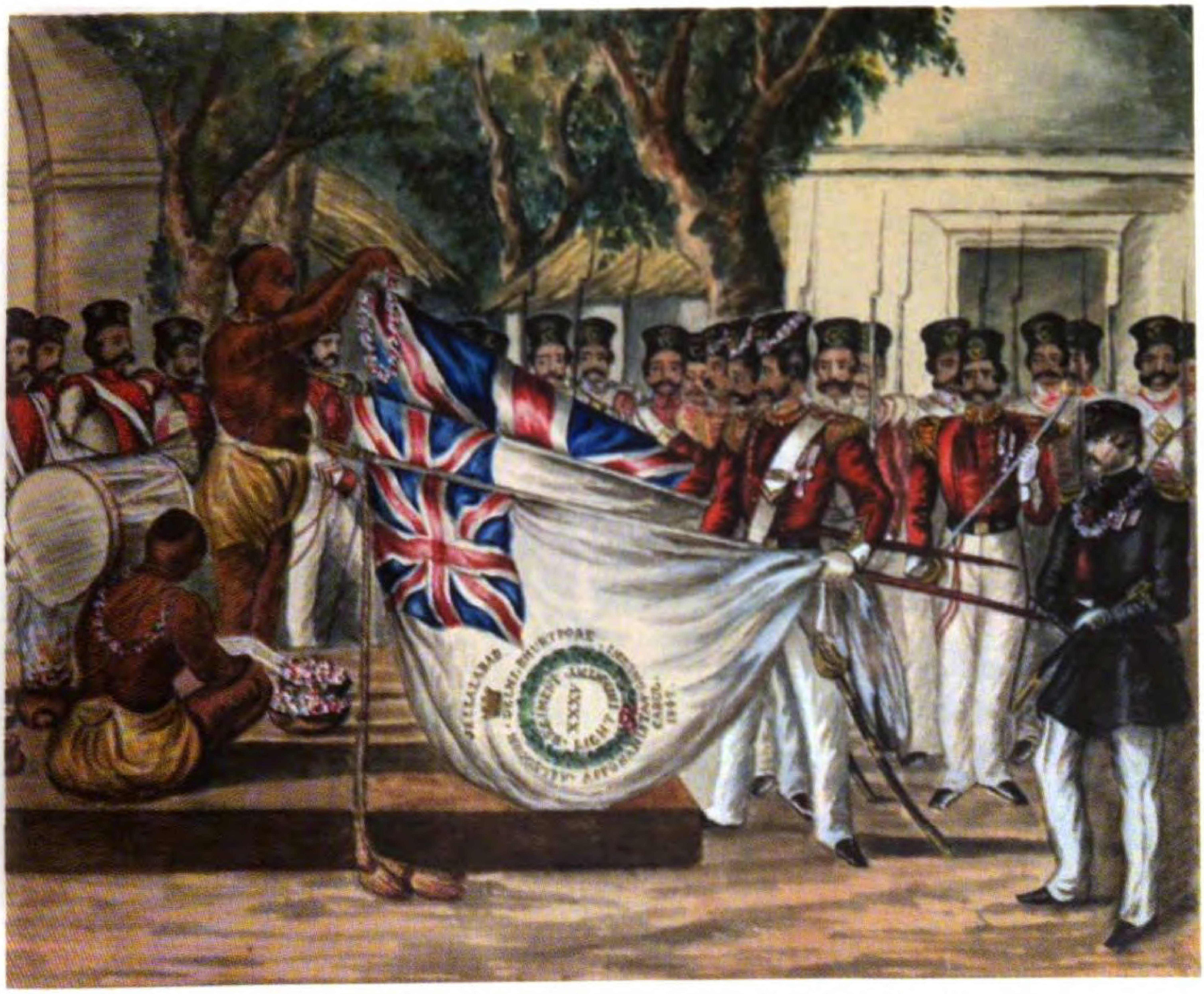
English Fort of Bombay.



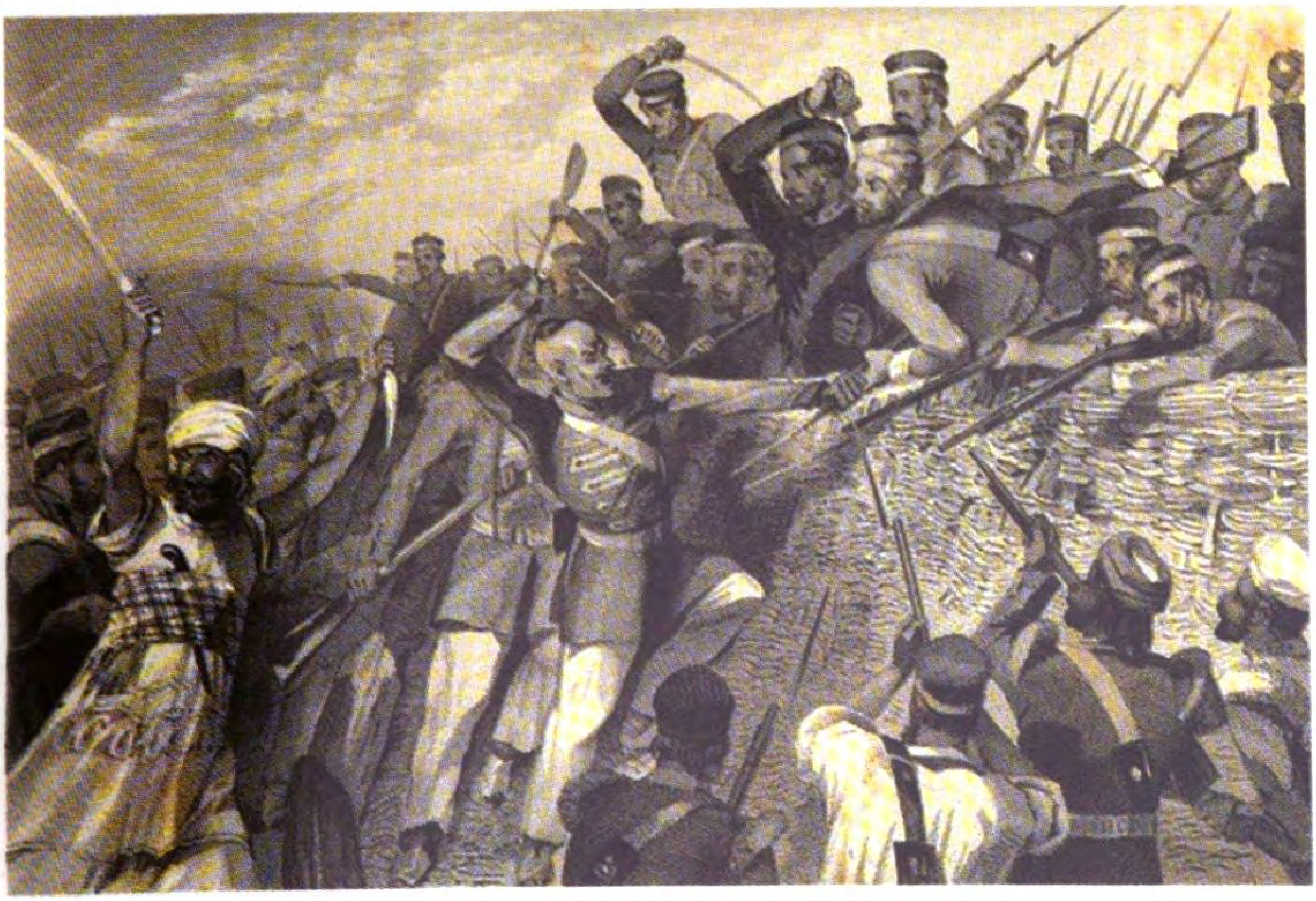
Interior of the East India House, London.



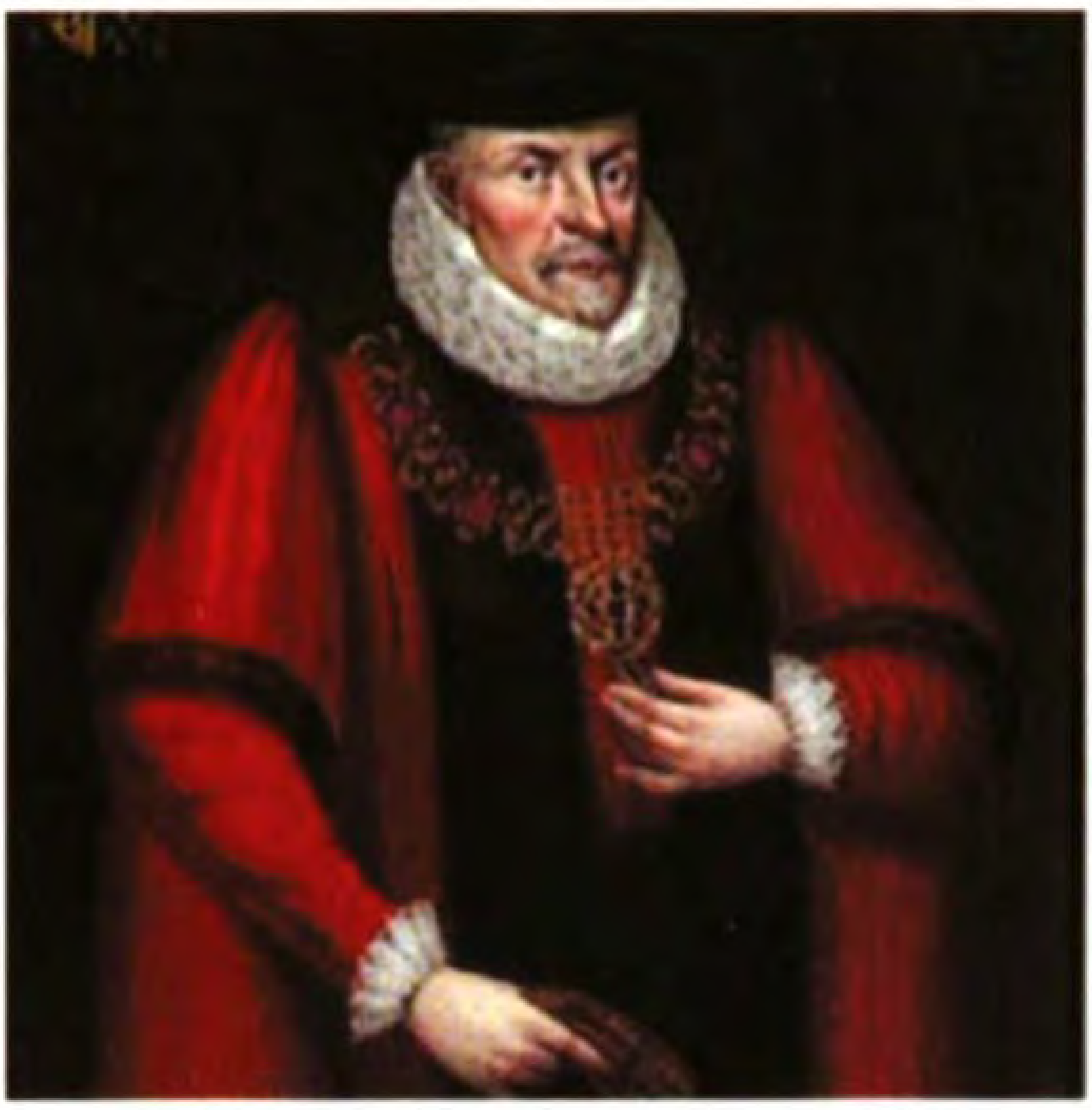
Fort William, Calcutta.

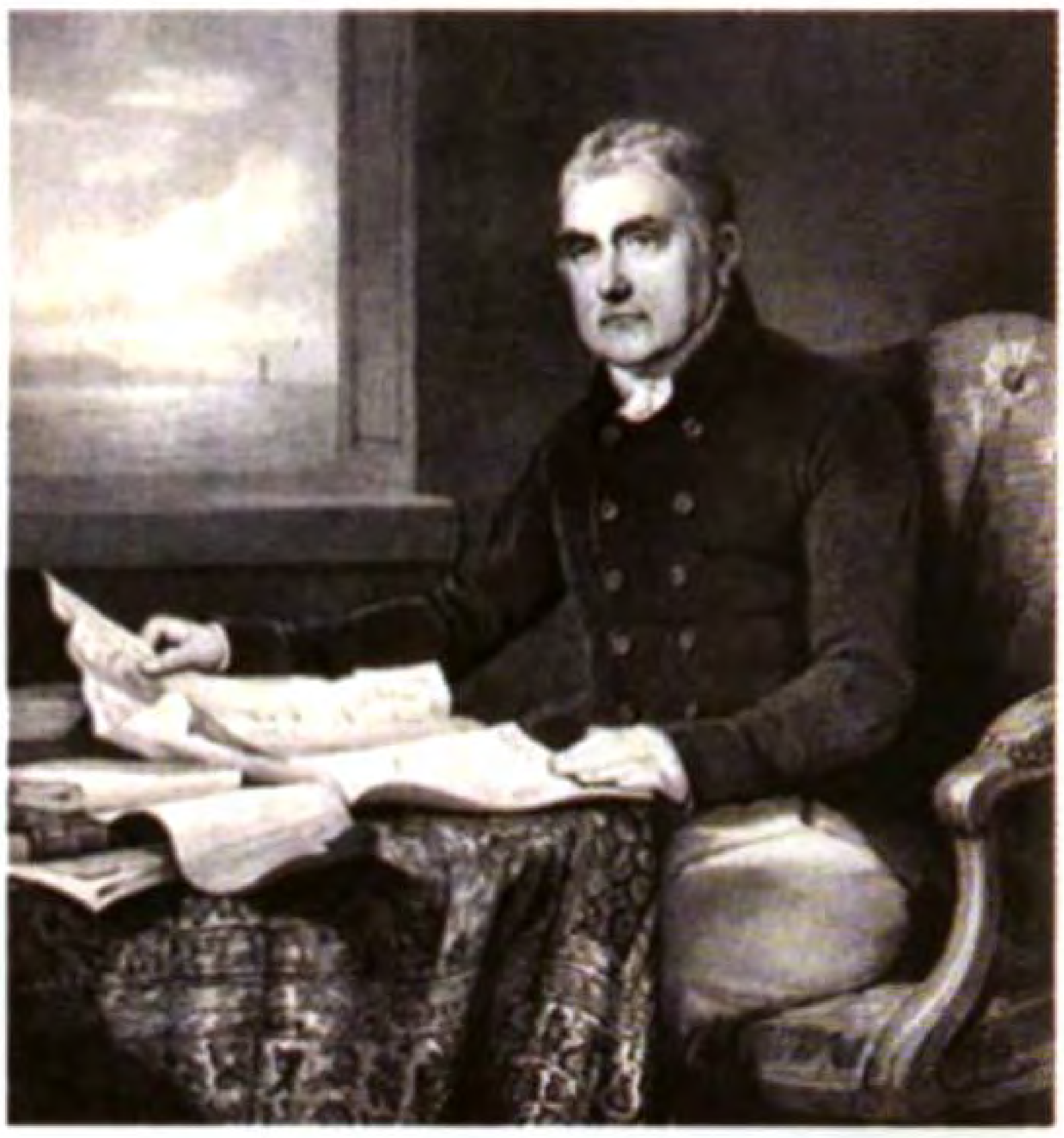

JELLALABAD
BHURTPORE
XXXV
LIGHT
CABUL

Pandits blessing sepoy regimental colours.

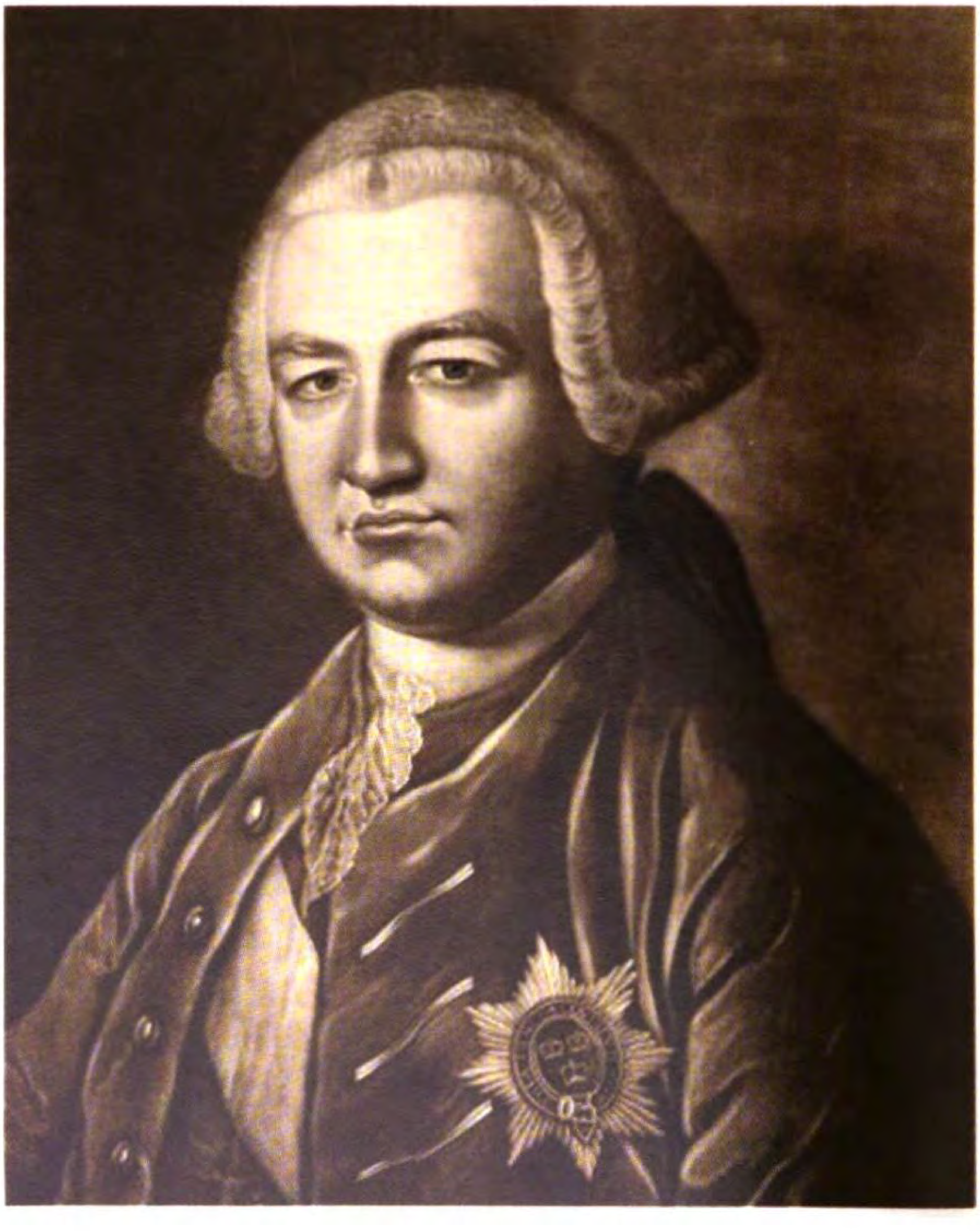


Attack of the Mutineers.





St.Thomas Rowe, the East India Company's first representative to Emperor Jahangir's court. (Right) John Woolmore, a typical East India Company director. (Below) Robert Clive.



wealth theory through songs and ballads and passing on apocalyptic, messianic messages.

Mangal Pandey was the man used by Nakki Khan in later propaganda. By this time Mangal had become disaffected—particularly offensive was the conduct of Lt. Wheeler and British atrocities—both Barrackpore and Behrampur had British officers who were sadists and delighted in attacking villages, picking up women for their pleasure.

Mangal was also agitated by the support extended to Lt. Wheeler. A lover of good men wrote: "Permit me enquire by what law a man who lives as a Christian, and peacefully endeavours to induce others to be Chirstians like him, is made an offender? It is removed that Colonel Wheeler is to be removed from the command of the 34th regiment and I have been told he is guilty of the crime I have mentioned. It is a new offence and I should like to know where it was first introduced into the Statute book....Ten years ago after Mr. Lewin's nonsense in Madras, the Court of directors sent out orders that none of their servants were to take part in supporting missions, but Lord Hardinge had the good sense to put that despatch in his pocket.... Men of sense ought to know by this time whither we are tending. The day certainly cannot be very distant, when the conversion of the natives, sepoys and all, will be accomplished. Orders o silence; patronage of error under the name of neutrality; nothing of that sort will answer the purpose; there is a decree of a higher power than the Government of India in this matter, and assuredly the time will come, when even Sepoys will be evangelised....[7]"

Such was the bitter atmosphere in Barrackpore—the Wheeler episode, the East India Company's chicanery—when governors general were themselves disregarding Board of directors missives, the situation at the lower end can easily be understood.

After the Wheeler episode Mangal seems to have welcomed Nakki with open arms. He was fed up with British arrogance and was now reacting to the stimulus gathering steam in the sepoys—why not listen to the religious propagandists and restore the rule of the king of Delhi? Why not establish rule of the sepoy?

Mangal Pandey is probably the missing link that connected mutinies in Behrampore and Barrackpore. He was the active who much in the tradition of martyrs decided to sacrifice his life in order to rouse the masses. The *Aalha* speaks of Nakki Khan and Mangal visiting Calcutta, taking a dip in the holy Ganges and swearing to root out foreign rule. The next stop Mangal made was at a Calcutta mansion to bid goodbye to a Hindustani ladylove married to a Bengali clerk, smarting under colonial Indian male chauvinism. Nakki Khan stood at the doorway looking out for possible intruders as Mangal drank *bhang* and made love. He was a long distance away from home and he was soon going to die.

References

1. *Freedom Struggle in Uttar Pradesh* Volume I, 1957.
2. ibid, pp. 287.
3. ibid, pp. 288.
4. ibid pp. 289-290.
5. ibid, pp. 294.
6. ibid.
7. ibid.

FIVE

The Calcutta-Patna Conspiracy

Nakki Khan did not approve of Mangal engaging in an affair with a married woman. But Mangal was adamant. The story he related came as a shock to Nakki.

The woman, whose name the *Aalha* does not mention, belonged to Nadia district, twenty-five miles north of Calcutta at the center of the Bengal rice bowl, a pastured land of three rivers, unusually green fields marked by the typical long running Bengali *medh*. Given to flooding, high agricultural yield, religious-Bhakti movements, handloom weaving, the *Jamdani* saree, clay modelling and peasant unrest, Nadia had a brass industry before the British takeover. Mangal Pandey's woman's great-grandfather, a high caste Kanyakubja Brahmin owned one of these. The woman, however, had fallen on hard days—the brass factory had been closed down and following the general chaos in eighteenth century Bengal, the family had to move from the city to the village, reverting to agriculture.

Proof that colonial rule was actually de-industrializing India can be had from even such small instances mentioned casually in ballad paragraphs. Kanyakubja Brahmins had moved to Bengal in the eighth century AD—original titles are lost but in Bengal they acquired Sanskritized names like Bannerjee, Mukhopadhyay, and Chatterjee. Initially they were priests but following the UP pattern they too emerged as a small aristocracy under the Mughals.

The Kanyakubjas supported the post-Mughal Bengal Nawabi, which came to an end following Nawab Siraj-ud-Daulah's defeat in the Battle of Plassey. Initially the Kanyakubjas lost heavily in the new dispensation—it was the Bengali Bania and the Kayastha who gained. Then following permanent settlement by Lord Cornwallis in 1793, when the British re-introduced a feudal system in the overwhelmingly small peasant Bengali economy, some Kanyakubja families sprang back to prominence. The later Tagores and many other famous Bengal renaissance figures were Kanyakubjas.

Mangal himself was a Saryuparjin Brahmin, caste members who had settled beyond the Saryu in Ayodhya—in fact the

UP Brahmins, dominated overwhelmingly by Kanyakubja and Saryuparjin competed for ritual superiority. Considered more orthodox, people who even opposed Lord Rama for having killed the Brahmin demon Ravan, Kanyakubjas even had a section in the Bengal army. Called Kanaujia Paltan, it was famous for fierce fighters and separate kitchens—'*gyarah Kanaujia, gyarah choolhe*' (eleven Kanaujias, eleven kitchens) went the saying.

Mangal's woman was married off at an early age to a Bengali Brahmin based in Calcutta. Bengal had a small stock of indigenous Brahmins as well—these forces had gained somewhat in the colonial administration.

The woman's husband was a clerk in the revenue demand. His superiors had charged him of corruption but he had been re-instated because a superior's munificence. The favour was dubious—the *Aalha* suggests bribery might have been involved.

The woman was unhappy—harassed by her mother-in-law and taunted by other members of the husband's family for not bearing children. She cut a lonely figure, a lower middle class version of the bored, Bengali housewife later to become a major theme in Bengali literature. How Mangal gained access to her is not clear—the *Aalha* mentions an attempted suicide—Mangal was performing his daily rituals in Calcutta's Ganga when he saw her floating half dead in the waters. River rituals are performed with the participants submerged waist deep in the water. Mangal swam and rescued the woman. Then on hearing of her plight he gave her his protection.

The idea of giving protection to the weak is an old one—mentioned in the scriptures it is considered a good deed for after-life. Mangal reprimanded her husband, impressing upon him his sepoy status. But the clerk was wily—he informed his seniors. Soon Barrackpore authorities were inquiring why Mangal was spending an inordinate time in Calcutta where he had gone 'in the name of performing rituals'.

Mangal returned to his barracks but the woman haunted him—especially her doe-like, helpless eyes. Mangal related the story to fellow comrades—they ragged him at first but then berated him for leaving in the lurch a woman who had sought refuge.

Women occupied a sensitive and major, though contradictory, place in the sensitive UP heart. Defending a woman's honour was considered sacred. Rape was strictly forbidden not merely as an immoral act but also as something which defiles caste and ritual status.

Mangal's dilemma must have been great—the *Aalha* goes into a sentimental tangent, recording how the sepoy neglected his duties, staying awake at night and how his friends stepped in to bail him out from trouble with British officers.

He faced an emotional crisis—flirting with a married woman even if she was oppressed, was a sin. But then there was the question of the way she had asked literally, for custody. In *Kissa Pande* too, Subedar Sitaram is put into a quandary—he saves a woman about to be killed by her husband in Afghanistan. But then the woman asks for his protection. Sitaram was married and belonged to a generation more orthodox than Mangal's. Yet mustering courage, braving the thought of being ex-communicated by the village he asks his officer's permission to keep the woman. It is not clear whether Sitaram actually married the woman.

Brahmins faced a major problem in polygamy. Traditionally the custom had come to be recognized in villages but Sanatan Dharma society was, by temper, monogamous. The first wife's family had to be satisfied and the man owed responsibility, especially to them.

Sitaram Pande does not reveal how he resolved the problem. He mentions his second wife living in the village but does not add details of the first wife. Moreover, there is a singular lack of emotional commitment in Sitaram's account. He records his travails and adventure with detached ease, as if he was sketching Candide's journal without the accompanying French pomposity. The encounter with the woman is just one episode in an epic trek, defined and looked at with rugged peasant eyes.

Mangal, however, was a man clearly in love. His account is as different from Sitaram's as Beethoven is from Bach. It signifies two eras. Mangal does not act as a peasant—the *Aalha* compares his condition with those of separated lovers in Kalidas' *Meghdoot*, where the only mode of communication is through clouds and the wind, the free nature as opposed to the cruel world of man.

The Kalidas reference, the paragraphs of love in an *Aalha*, a ballad of valour are amazing. They both speak of how the folk form, conceived originally by bards to tell and retell the exploits of Aalha and Udal, two brothers, inhabiting the wild ravines and sapphire chopped beauty of Bundelkhand in south-west Uttar Pradesh. Aalha and Udal are medieval warriors—their tale is didactic and full of wonders. *Aalha* is the quintessential, craggy, warrior tale, not a fantasy or a fable. It is short in romance—its definition of love is aristocratic and propagandist—it celebrates a woman's beauty but the way a knight would see it.

Mangal's *Aalha* has a personal touch—his comrades declare him a love-struck bird that might soon be unfit for combat. He takes all the jibes in his strides. Then one day he thinks he has had enough.

Mangal decides to elope with the woman. Then, his Brahmin, warrior blood calls out—elopement is reserved for 'weak lovers' and cowards—how can a member of a martial race commit such perfidy?

Here too the absorbing part is the reference to love. Soon the *Aalha* sheds tenderness and reverts to the soldierly mode. Suddenly Mangal shakes off his apathy—he actually terms the soft moments as stupor. Then he makes the resolution. The woman who has asked for his support will get it even if it means violence and a violation of convention.

Again, a theme beguiling to western observers is seen. In India, tradition not modernity breaks tradition. Mangal's sense of social responsibility, his personal tradition of a warrior overrides the morality of society.

Eloping was ruled out—Mangal approached his comrades and they made the only possible scheme—of 'lifting' the woman and bringing her 'home'.

The theme of 'lifting' is different from kidnapping. Beginning from Prithviraj Chauhan's famous 'lifting' of Samyukta, his lady love, and continuing in *Aalha* tales, the act required the woman's consent. It could start without acquiescence but had to end in that—this was vital to preserve both the purity and nobility of the act and to prevent it from degenerating into assault and coercion. The razor thin latitude of astute violence between a man and a woman was preserved.

It is not clear whether Mangal took his comrades along to Calcutta—he met Nakki who dissuaded him from pursuing the action. Nakki had a more pressing task—the meeting of secret Walliullah-ites in Patna.

Mangal did not heed Nakki's advice. He reached the woman's door and shouted her husband's name. Shaking with fright the clerk decided to give in—he demanded money in exchange for his woman. Mangal spat in disgust—drawing his sword back he slapped the man. Later he told Nakki that 'lifting' a woman from a coward's house was no valorous act.

Instead an arrangement was worked out—Mangal would visit the woman at night, see to her well being and then return. Allusions to whether the in-laws knew of the situation are cryptic. Nakki often accompanied Mangal on his trysts.

Mangal was in love and he did not see a way out of his predicament—there were constant calls from home requesting marriage; Mangal's mother, who is spoken off as a woman of substance, (his father was dead) sent several messages. She had seen a Brahmin girl for him—he was far advanced in age and ought to have married years ago.

In 1856 Mangal was twenty-eight years old—his non-marital status remains an enigma, as even soldiers in Awadh were married off at an earlier age. Religious influences might have played a part here—Mangal had become a member of the local Dharam Sabha and had promised not to get married till his duties had been performed.

The mysterious Dharma Sabha, spoken off earlier by Hearsey as well has no trace left in Barrackpore. That there was a parallel organization by that name is itself a mystery[1]. But the *Aalha* refers to a 'Dharam Niti Sabha' and it is tantalizing to imagine the possibilities.

The Dharma Sabha was a Sanatani organization and was staggeringly peasant in makeup and disposition. The involvement of the Bengal peasant in 1857 is a neglected field. After all, the province was unusually quiet throughout the rebellion with only East Bengal putting up some resistance.

The reason behind Bengal's silence might have links with Mangal's story. Apparently Nakki was a close member of the Dharma Sabha. Being a Muslim he was given a special seat and his job was to act as a courier between the Sanatanis and the Walliullah-ites. He performed several odd jobs—including ferrying literature across borders, getting printed material from the Gangetic plain to Burdwan, Nadia and Murshidabad and keeping in touch with a certain Mukhopadhyay said to be the kingpin of Bengal revolutionaries.

Mukhopadhyay Babu had his quarters in Barrackpore. A former cook at the army cantonment which kept special Brahmin *Maharajs* (cooks) to prepare nutritious vegetarian diets for the sepoys, he had been discharged honourably somewhere around the early 1850s. Subsequently, he had opened a sweetmeat shop near the cantonment, which became famous. It also acquired a reputation for providing a safe haven to men on the run from the long arm of colonial law.

Nakki Khan introduced Mangal to Mukhopadhyay. Mangal was impressed by the cook's erudition. The latter, in turn, spoke of a certain zamindar of Nadia who wanted to send money to the budding conspiracy in Calcutta and Patna.

The conspiracy element in 1857 is brought dramatically to light by Sitaram Bawa's statement recorded on 18 January 1858:

(A)

> "The Sorapoor Rajah, the Satara Rajah, the Kolhapur Rajah, the Deshmook of Akulkote, the great Mooktian at Hyderabad....The Mysore Rajah used to tell these

people that with the help of God all would be well...a great army is coming this way. Baji Row's son and Holkar and other great princes had all joined together, and as soon as they advanced all would join, the old dynastied would be restored and all would be placed on their thrones..."

"The Baija Bhaiee was the person who first commenced this conspiracy about twenty years ago, at the time she was taken from Gwalior ad kept at Nasik."

(B)

"Then Bajee Rao died at Bithoor. He left a widow and an adopted son named Nana Sahib. ...always a worthless and not very clever fellow and never would have been anything but for the tuition of his Gooroo, Dassa Bawa (said to have come from a place called Kalee Dhar, beyond Kangra, this side of Jummoo). Three years ago, or perhaps a month less, Nana Sahab gave the Gooroo a sunnud, granting a five lakh jaghir and nachatras...Dassa Bawa had told him that he would become as powerful as the Peishwa had once been; and the sunnud was to take effect when he came to power. Dassa Bawa then made a Hunooman horoscope of eight angles. Nana, then, after seven days of prayer, went to sleep on the horoscope, and Hunooman having revealed to him that he would be victorious , he felt that the truth of the prediction had been confirmed and at once presented Dassa Bawa with twenty five thousand rupees worth of jewels. Dassa Baba then went to Nepaul.....

(C)

"All this was communicated by the Nana to Baija Bhaiee and to all other states—to Holkar, Scindia, Assam (or Burma), Jeypoor, Joudhpoor, Kolah Boonder (maybe Kotah-Bundi?) Jhalawar-Rewah, Baroda-Kutch-Bhooj-Nagpur, to the Ghonds of Chanda (and doubtless Sambalpur) to Hyderabad, Soorapoor, Kolapoor, Satara, Indore—in fact he did not leave out any place where there was native prince. He wrote to all...He (Rajah of Travancore) is the only one who did not at all agree...Nana Sahin wrote these letters about three years ago, at intervals, a short time, perhaps two to three months, previous to the annexation of Oudh. But at first he got no answers. Nobody had any hope. After the annexation he wrote still more, and then the Soukars of Lucknow joined in his views. Maun Singh, who is the chief of the Poorbeah, or Poordusee joined. Then the sepoys began to make tajwez (plans) among themselves, and the Lucknow Soukars supported them. Until Oudh was annexed—Nana Sahib did not e answers from anyone; but when that occurred, many began to take courage

> and answer him. The plot among the sepoys first took place—the discontent about the greased cartridge. Then answers began to pour in. Golab Singh of Jummoo, was the first to send an answer. He said that he was ready with men, money, and arms, and he sent money to Nana Sahib, through one of the Lucknow Soukars (Sahukars)[1]."

Here two facts are important—Sitaram Bawa gives the names of many princes, like Scindia and Golab Singh of Jammu who ultimately helped the British put down the uprising. Then he lists Nana Sahib and his guru as the chief brains behind the plot to overthrow the British. Then of course, he mentions the role of Lucknow sahukars.

Sahukars were not Banias or traditional traders. They constituted the last remnant of Indian capital. They were industrious having invested in the industries that closed down following the East India Company's change of policy. They were thus an aggrieved bourgeois element so crucial in anti-colonial rebellions.

Sitaram Bawa further goes on to mention how the sepoys were organized and that everything was under control of Dassa Bawa and the latter was a hundred and twenty-five years old.

The *Aalha* too talks of a Sanatan Dharma sadhu a hundred and twenty-five years old who addressed religious assemblies in Haridwar, which Nakki Khan attended. Was Dassa Bawa the same sadhu?

The zamindar of Nadia, Mukhopadhyay's contact, later recruited by Nakki Khan in the Calcutta conspiracy had promised help of men, money and arms and a further mobilization of Bengal zamindars. An army was supposed to march from Nadia, Burdwan and Birbhum to Calcutta. Sitaram Bawa himself states that the original plot was to start the disturbances in Benaras and then move to Calcutta.

So in the beginning was it Calcutta, the seat of British power, the governor general's place of pride, the center of Manchester trade, the main target? Is that why disturbances started first in DumDum moving on to Behrampur and then to Barrackpore?

Nakki Khan was also in touch with the Walliullah-ite Patna group. This was a large underground organization stretching from Munger to Arrah and Jagdishpur. The latter two centers were synonymous with Kunwar Singh, the fiery Rajput leader, a great follower of composite culture and a Sanatan Dharmi, the leader of Hindus and Muslims of western Bihar. Earlier Kunwar Singh was involved in a suspect conspiracy during the Sikh wars. In fact, contrary to popular perceptions, the Hindustani sepoys were not that anxious to conquer Punjab for the British. Reports about their hesitations are widespread.

Kunwar Singh was in correspondence with Sikh leaders through Peer Ali, the leading Walliullah-ite of Patna. The *Aalha* speaks of Nakki Khan and Peer Ali meeting Teja Singh, a Sikh fakir in Amritsar. Teja was part of the conspiracy—he had a force of Sikh daredevils who were in contact with Pathans of Hazara. Teja Singh was one of the leaders. The British were to hang Peer Ali and Teja Singh later. Nakki Khan was in touch with Walliullah-ites—the chain thus formed reveals Mangal Pandey as an important link.

Bihar perhaps was to prove the rallying point, a major theater of war and destruction between Benaras and Calcutta. Nakki Khan, at one point, was found talking to sepoys at Bhagalpur and Hazaribagh, scenes of future Bihar-Jharkhand mutinies. Bihar leaders of the rebellion pondered over the issue of marching over to Calcutta and there was a serious move to foment an uprising in Purulia on the Bihar-Bengal border.

Patna, also called Azimabad was a sturdy, sloped city of caravan serais and British buildings were built in the Greek style with huge Doric columns. Bihar had come under the British Diwani earlier right after the Battle of Buxar (1764). Permanent Settlement was implemented here as well but the old nobility was not uprooted. Many fief holders of Mughal times were confirmed as zamindars. In Bengal the British had to uproot support for the Indo-Mughal polity and way of life. They also had to kill off the industry. It was necessary therefore to create a new and pliant nobility. In Bihar, where the accent was on tapping the rich minerals of Jharkhand and the revenues from the central and northern parts, the old aristocracy was largely kept intact.

People like Nakki Khan and Peer Ali had a tough time in Bihar. Kunwar Singh was a rare phenomenon—the aristocracy in general was not very supportive. Even the Muslims were wary—initially the main Maulvis did not support either Nakki or Peer. A Muslim banker, arrested later by the British helped Peer Ali[2].

Walliullah-ism was dubbed too radical, pro-peasant and anti-landlord for their tastes. Nakki and Peer Ali had to take recourse to coercive measures—a small force, composed mainly of petty bourgeois Muslim youths and shop-keepers, was engaged in the collection of arms. After dusk when Patna alleys exuded the smell of garbage, scent and sweat, oil lamps unveiled the tryst of lovers and the greenish-blue Bihari hue of the Magadhan landscape, the Walliullah-ite armed task force went about knocking doors and sounding Maulvis. Sword in hand, the youth told the religious leaders calmly that India was going to face an armed revolution, which was going to restore the king of Delhi. The Maulvis had a choice—they could either die then and there or enroll with the Walliullah-ites.

Nakki Khan Khan informed Mangal about the Patna developments. The news must have heartened Mangal.

Indeed in both Bihar and Bengal, British policies had assured that the upper classes remain clear of link with revolutionaries. These forces had a clear stake in the maintenance of colonial rule. The British did not create inferior clients or subjugated brokers. They made new partners in the colonial enterprise—they made sure that any anti-colonial uprising would inevitably take on the contours of an Asian class struggle.

References

1. *Freedom Struggle in Uttar Pradesh*, Vol I, pp.372-274.
2. The Patna conspiracy came to light in July 1857 before the Kunwar Singh inspired Bihar mutiny in Dinapore.

SIX

A Time of Distress

The Bengal zamindar was out recruiting followers to what increasingly appears not as a conspiracy but a quaint underground mass movement.

The aspect of 1857 being a mass movement—both planned and spontaneous, evolving through trial, error and the individual trajectories of thousands of avant garde personnel—has never been probed. Similar scholarly apathy has accompanied 1857 classification in terms of social forces and political conditions.

Bengal, in the beginning of the year 1857 was actually undergoing metamorphoses—the rent racked peasantry rioted in 1861[1]. Why did the same peasantry remain inert four years earlier? Why did Bengal's overwhelming Muslim population, a major base for continuing Walliullah-ite insurgency in the 1830s, not forthcoming in 1857?

These answers lie buried in the Mangal Pandey episode. A twentieth century Bengali novel speaks of a peasant army led by a nationalist army zamindar somewhere close to Nadia in 1857. The army's target is to reach Delhi to help Bahadur Shah Zafar and the sepoys in their titanic anti-British struggle.

The army disintegrates by the time it crosses Bihar. There are several stories woven into the novel, several reasons why the force could not remain intact as a cohesive unit. But it was inspiringly Bengali in composition; its recruitment followed a long period of propaganda that convinced people, surrounded by stolidity and fear that British rule was at an end.

Like any mass movement, 1857 had no head—it had a number of minds and personalities but no particular, representative face. In the twentieth century India was to add a totally new chapter, the Gandhian mass movement, to anti-colonial impulses. The fact that even 1857, hitherto seen as a mutiny or at best a national war, was actually an armed mass movement, wider, deeper and more nationalist than the Gandhian initiative is truly unusual.

India witnessed a number of peasant uprisings in the pre-1757 period. Beginning from the Bengal Sanyasi revolt in the

1760s and ending with 1856 Santhal rebellion, these catalysts signified the classic serf skirmishes. All parts, from Tamil Nadu in the south to Karnataka, Goa, Assam, Orissa and Manipur had their share of disturbances. As noted earlier, sepoy mutinies too had occurred—these follow a design not too dissimilar from happenings elsewhere.

However, there were two very Indian happenings—one of course was the satyagraha or the *dharna* seen first in Benaras in 1809[2]. In response to new town-chowkidari duties imposed by the authorities thousands of traders, shopkeepers, government employees and artisans came out in the streets. Squatting near the ghats in an organized manner they refused to budge even after repeated administrative threats. The move remained peaceful with only a few stray incidents involving local toughies and a few policemen.

The British were perplexed—they had no idea how to deal with the situation. The people of Benaras were, however, were following a tradition. Satyagraha is an old Indian tactic—traders resorted to *dharna* in Surat and Dacca in Mughal times.

The Benaras situation was diffused only when duties were withdrawn. Then came the Rohilkhand-Bareilly clash in 1815. More than anything else the Bareilly event illustrated an Asian armed mass movement.

Disturbances began over a row over the rights of a Muslim Kazi—a British officer humiliated him. Muslims collected in the mosque. The administration panicked. Soon crowds had come out on the streets—there was a lot of slogan shouting. Then the police charged. The peaceful crowd began collecting arms (the population had not been disarmed). By night the city was on fire—mobs were attacking governmental buildings. By the next day news reached the countryside—Rajput landlords and peasants congregated in the city forming a small peasant army and fought the British.

Communal harmony was total despite British attempts to sow religious divisions. What perplexed observers was the rapid nature of mobilization—there was no visible agency or organization. Yet within minutes the news—and this was no rumour—had reached town interiors and the villages. By the next day, the British were facing an armed mass insurrection.

So four types of mass resistance defines pre-1857 India: peasant counter-assaults, peaceful satyagraha, armed mass tactics combining the town and the countryside and sepoy mutinies. To this must be added the fifth element—the resistance of local powers like the Marathas and Jat Raja of Bharatpur, which went on till 1849, the last Sikh War.

All elements came together in 1857. There was also the sixth element of a political coup d'état achieved by Meerut mutineers who reached Delhi and performed the political act of freeing Bahadur Shah Zafar from British clutches and restoring him as India's emperor.

Satyagraha was used extensively in the pre-1757 period. Wajid Ali Shah, the man par excellence of the hour, initiated a queer mode of resistance. It looked eccentric at first, in tune with the image built of him by the British.

Immediately after Oudh's annexation Wajid Ali decided on making a public show of leaving Oudh. This might have been normal in other circumstances but it made the British jittery. The *vidaai* turned out to be a huge spectacle—exactly the kind of effect Wajid Ali intended. Hindus and Muslims thronged the Qaiserbagh gates, many of them weeping while the king stood helplessly consoling his people, mouthing couplets.

Some Britishers thought that the king was being humiliated. They had no idea of the spectacle's impact on the minds of the people. Here was a king people held in regard, who in turn valued their traditions and gave them a voice, being forced to leave like a pariah, from a city he had built. The British had offered transport and were quite willing to extend all hospitality. But Wajid Ali, who knew the Awadhian emotional make-up, wanted a showdown of a different kind. Lucknow citizens quoted the humiliation of their king during several later uprisings.

Earlier Wajid Ali had refused to sign on an annexation treaty despite a large amount being offered: "His majesty then again spoke of the inutility of a Treaty; he was in no position to sign one. It was useless; his honor and country were gone; he would not trouble government for any maintenance, but would proceed to England, and throw himself at the foot of the Throne to entreat a reconsideration of the orders and to intercede for mercy. The Resident begged His Majesty to reflect that, unless the King signed the Treaty he would have no security whatsoever for his future maintenance, or for that of his family; that the very liberal provision devised by the British Government would inevitably be reduced and reconsidered...The Prime Minister warmly seconded and supported the Resident's advice, and protested that he had done everything in his power to induce Hs Majesty to accede to the wishes of the British Government. Hereupon, His Majesty's brother exclaimed that there was no occasion for a Treaty.' His Majesty was no longer independent and in a position to be one of the contracting powers; his office was gone and the British Government was all too powerful. His Majesty, who was moved to tears, recapitulated the favors which his ancestors had received at the hands of the British Government, and pathetically dwelt upon his helpless position. Uncovering himself, he placed his turban in the hands of the Resident, declaring that, now (sic.) his titles, rank, and position were all gone; and it was not for him to sign a Treaty; or to enter into any negotiation[3]."

Artful Wajid Ali was playing politics here—his very obsequiousness, misunderstood by later Marxists and nationalists, was defiant. By refusing to sign the treaty while reiterating his family's close ties with the British, he was shifting the moral burden of Awadh's annexation to the British. In one stroke he was wiping away the charges of nepotism and misrule the British had used to annex his kingdom.

The message that the king did not sign the treaty and went on to disband his army had an electrifying effect: "In a fit of petulance, the King had ordered all his troops, at the capital, to be at once paid up, and discharged, from the 24th of this Mahomedan month....As the peace of the city might be disturbed in consequence of this measure....[4]"

The British were apprehensive of the king's conduct—saying that he is acting against his own interests they moved wings of native regiments to the Residency neighborhood occupied by Europeans.

Why would a king move against his interests? Secretly Wajid Ali had left Hazrat Mahal behind with instructions to resist when the time came. Many propagandists sent by him were active along with Bahadur Shah's men in keeping the movement alive. The *Aalha* shows Mangal reacting angrily against both the annexation and then to the king's humiliation. He recalls fondly the times when his father visited Lucknow and came back with fantastic stories about the palace and the king's generosity. He also recalled the way the king's soldiers used to move from village to village with box, in which complaints could be put.

Sepoys were sour over Awadh's annexation—it was their country and was now under white rule. Nakki Khan had a row with sepoys whom he called traitors—Mangal had to intercede on his behalf. Nakki told the Red coats that previously villagers used to stand up when a sepoy approached. Now they would pelt him with stones—how could a son of the soil stand and see their mother (land) being despoiled?

In Barrackpore, Indian sepoy troops were in the habit of encroaching upon peasant lands, destroying crops during target practice or marches. One such instance somewhere in the month of February 1857 made the peasants come out—led by the local priest they sat on a *dharna* in the local town-square. The police could not remove them—soon shopkeepers and traders joined them, listing their own grievances.

Sepoys were sent to scatter the satyagrahis. Mangal was amongst them—it was a British policy to use sepoys, as has been noted above, in quelling internal disturbances. But the policy could also backfire.

Military discipline and cohesiveness is maintained by keeping the army on the borders, busy tacking foreign enemies, making one unit compete with the other. One major reason of British defeat in the American War of Independence was the use of an Anglo-Saxon army to suppress American civilians as a matter of policy. This led to severe demoralization, as an army is not trained to do the job of a 'bad' police force. After a while either the units become a law unto themselves or the military hierarchy loses its moral power.

Beginning in 1764, the constant mutinies of the Bengal army showed there was something seriously wrong with the basis on which it was organized. The 1824-25 mutinies in Barrackpore and Rungpore clearly revealed the sepoys as having a mind of their own. If they were so indispensable that the British could not do anything without them, then they did not need the British officers.

On the fateful Barrackpore day, Mangal held back his comrades saying too much was at stake and they could not continue oppressing their own countrymen. Now here again Mangal was speaking the language of a mass movement propagandist. He mentioned the sepoy suppression of the Santhal uprising. Later during 1857 proper, Jharkhand tribes were to join up with the sepoy units in Hazaribagh and Ranchi.

Seen during several revolutions, the role of a ringleader, in preparing his men for a revolt, to speak the right things at the right time without revealing his plans, is exemplary. By linking two separate instances, the Santhal happening and Barrackpore, Mangal performed a political act of providing perspective.

The immediate impact of Mangal's tirade was not very encouraging. Sepoys did not listen and though they did not harm the satyagrahis, they made them leave with a show of arms.

Nakki and Mangal had a long conversation after the Barrackpore town event. Nakki was particularly angry at the attitude of Bihar Muslims and the difficulties faced by the Walliullah-ites. Nakki also mentioned how Azimullah Khan, Nana Sahib's secretary, a colourful character who played a major role in the pre-'57 mobilization was sending money to Bihar and Hyderabad. But beyond Kunwar Singh the Bihar

Rajas were unwilling to join the move and in Hyderabad where a young Nawab has just come to power, a pro-British party was influencing Salar Jung, the Nawab's Vizier and Hyderabad's effective ruler.

Clearly times were not encouraging—the sepoy, though sullen and disaffected, needed a spark—1857 after all was not a coup by a military top brass. It was a stratagem brought about by the people with ordinary soldiers as their vanguard.

Instances of successful soldier mutinies, political in nature directed towards the capture of the state power, are rare. What the 1857 propagandists asked the sepoys to do was much ahead of its time. They had to kill their officers and take over the reins of the army and the civil administration.

Anyone familiar with army conduct knows that the soldier follows the officer corp. Well trained, big armies have disintegrated once their officer corp disappeared. Napoleon mastered this tactic—his storm movement, designed to tear through the enemy's center was meant to de-mobilize the officer corp. The British, in turn, devised the line as opposed to the column tactics. Here the infantry held a long line holding off charges as long as possible protecting the officer corp—the latter would then charge and win the day.

Sepoys were dependent, doubly on their officers, as they did not have senior ones from their ranks. Even those who entertained the idea of a mutiny were unsure: who is going to command once the officers are killed? How will a sepoy conduct a charge once the officer corp is blown away?

The British had done a smart thing from their point of view by excluding the sepoy from reaching the officer corp. On other hand, they had unwittingly encouraged unity and racial cohesiveness. With the British officers living in separate quarters, British sepoys deployed in separate regiments, not allowed to mingle with Indians, the feeling of 'them' and 'us' as constituting two entities in one army was strong. The ethnological card played so deftly had a reverse logic as well. Moreover, Indian soldiers did not share the idea of treason, as spelled out by the British. They, and this is crucial, did not consider John Company as a state. It was an employer at best. A good employer was to be revered but a bad one could be displaced—it needs to be remembered that India still was not part of the British Empire. The East India Company ruled in the name of the Mughal king, just as Marathas had done from 1771 to 1803. There was a difference between *hukum* (order) and *mulk* (nation)—the British line was: *Mulk Badshah ka, Hukum Company Bahadur ka*—meaning that the nation belongs to the emperor while the order is that of the British.

So for sepoys as well as general Indians, the mutiny was not a revolt—it was more a restoration of legitimate authority usurped by John Company: an upstart. Technically sepoys owed their allegiance to the Mughal Empire.

There was an inevitable clash of values and relations were reaching the point of strain. But the negatives cancelled out the positives in favour of revolution.

Mangal and Nakki realized that something else—something more dramatic—had to be done. Torch lit meetings were held and lots of options discussed. Some favoured a general attack on Calcutta by Behrampore and Barrackpore regiments while others went the glib way arguing for their grievances being put before the white officers; to fool and later attack them. Money became a major consideration—Nana Sahib was reputed not to have enough. The Lucknow sahukars had raised money in Kathiawar and Bhuj but in Bengal proper where perhaps the initial strategy of attacking Calcutta was still strong there was the question of contacting the regiments as far as Assam and Dacca.

It was soon realized that someone would have to come forward to to bell the cat. It was imperative for a martyr to emerge—someone could lead by example, break the multifarious sepoy hesitations and fracture the bond however tenuous that existed between the black Sepoy and the White officer.

References

1. The reference is to Bengal Indigo riots.
2. *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars*, C.A. Bayly, pg. 319-320.
3. *Freedom Struggle in Uttar Pradesh*, Vol I, pp. 97.
4. ibid, pp. 90.

SEVEN

The Indian Hero

January to April were charged months for sepoy regiments stationed in Bengal. The Chapati and Lotus happenings, where villagers passed these items from rural area to the next, were underway since 1856.

The *Aalha* extols the Lotus as representing the Hindu call to arms, or a warning that something 'upheaval like' is going to happen. The message was not negative. Similarly, the Chapati was a Muslim symbol. Denoting the earth and how Hindustani Muslims ought to take their destiny in their own hands.

The Chapati and Lotus surges are called *tehriks* or movements. Indeed Nakki Khan was involved; the Walliullah-ite chain stretched from the south to the Gangetic plain: the Walliullah-ite modus operandi was to bring the Chapatis till Gwalior and Jhansi. The latter seems to be a major meeting point—it was from Jhansi that the Chapativaala met the Lotus carrier—the Fakir and the Sadhu discussed their routes and how things were going to be distributed. If sketched on a map, the Chapati and the Lotus route involved two triangles with one being inverted. The lower point converged on Hoshangabad and upper on Kurukshetra in Haryana. This seems to be the region, covering UP, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Haryana where the propaganda was concentrated.

The Da Vinci Code and other Dan Brown books have made the two triangles famous for representing the union of the male and female principles. In India the triangles are present both on Shershah Suri buildings in Purana Qila as well as Humayan's tomb. Both Hindus and Muslims regard the inverted triangles symbolism as sacred.

The recurrence of the symbol in 1857 propaganda radically changes perceptions—a Baba of Gwalior tutored Nakki Khan in the art of Hindu symbolism and the way it has been used by ancient fathers.

It appears that simultaneous propaganda units were working in different parts. While the Gangetic belt was receiving Chapatis and Lotus', the cartridge question was central in Bengal.

The British had three musketry depots, in DumDum, Ambala and Sialkot and three arsenals in Fort William, Calcutta, DumDum amd Meerut. The Brown Bess muskets the sepoys owned were going to be replaced by the Enfield rifle in which a new kind of greased bullet was to be used.

The tallow used in grease had to come from an animal and sepoy regiments were ordered to send detachments to the various musketry depots (bullets were manufactured in the arsenals). Then the unrest began.

Unknown to Barrackpore authorities, Mangal was seething with anger at the high-handed attitude of Lt. Wheeler, already under controversy for trying to convert the sepoys. One Sheikh Paltu, later to appear in the Mangal Pandey saga, a Muslim from Haryana was particularly friendly with Wheeler. Mangal one day insulted Paltu in front of other Muslim sepoys. Most of them agreed with Mangal and did not intervene.

Then Nakki Khan arrived with the news that the cartridges were greased with pig and cow fat. The news was immediately conveyed to all the four regiments in Barrackpore.

Apart from the Chapati-Lotus and the cartridge issue the third matter of the British mixing cow and pig bone dust in the bazaar *atta* brought by sepoys was active in Bihar. The combined result of fast travelling information created panic, fear and then resentment. Contrary to what scholars have said these were not crude isolated rumours being spread by ignorant villagers.

Disaffection in Barrackpore regiments was great—it was here that the 2nd Native Infantry (grenadiers) expressed anti-British feelings openly for the first time. The occasion was an afternoon parade during which doubts were expressed over the cartridge paper as well.

Mangal was in touch with 2nd Native Infantry sepoys—Sheikh Paltu was probably a British spy by then as Nakki cursed him for being a 'traitor' who sold his soul to the 'White Skins'. The 34th Native Infantry had a large number of Awadh sepoys—the 2nd NI was predominantly Bihari and Muslim.

In January news had come about the DumDum incident—suddenly apprehensions began spreading from sepoy to sepoy about British attempts to despoil Hindu-Muslim caste and religion. The *Aalha* suggests that the DumDum act was part of an elaborate plot designed by the Walliullah-ites and carried out by Bechan and Machli, two of Nakki Khan's *shagirds*.

The 2nd February incident became a talking point—a court of inquiry was set up. On 6 February, a 34th NI sepoy approached a British captain with the news that all four Barrackpore regiments were going to mutiny.

What had happened between the 2nd and the 6th? Apparently Nakki had formed a cell of three sepoys on the 2nd—the cell held secret meeting. The meeting was held on the 4th and the 5th night. A 34th NI *jemadar*, part of Sheikh Paltu's group also spoke of a budding intrigue in the parade ground: "They had their heads tied up with cloths leaving only a small part of the face exposed. They asked me to join them, and I asked what was I to join them in. They replied they were willing to die for their religion and that...they would plunder the station and kill all the Europeans and go wherever they liked."

Mangal was tense and nervous—things were moving fast. He had thought at first that things would go slow, allowing him time to realize the magnitude of what he was going to unfold. Then one night Mangal had a dream—he saw a large river of blood coming towards him. Two British skulls were floating and sepoys galloped in the air.

The dream unnerved Mangal—he woke up in cold sweat. For the first time in his life he thought that how would it be if peasants and sepoys have a power of their own? Next he went to see his lady-love, resting at that time in Behrampore at a relative's place. Mangal was almost out of reach during the meeting. He talked of a lot of blood flowing soon in India from Calcutta to Delhi. The woman was aghast—what was wrong with him today?

Mangal suddenly got up and left—he returned a few hours later, very tired but beaming. The woman could not understand the look—then Mangal told her that 120 miles west from Calcutta at Raniganj the telegraph office was destroyed and fires had broken out at a sergeant's bungalow. The lover further told his mistress that this was the work of a wing of the 2nd NI—similar fires would break out in a day or two in Barrackpore as well.

British officers did not take the Barrackpore mutiny warning seriously. White officers did not trust Sheikh Paltu—he boasted too much. Moreover, Mangal's track record was good and everyone knew of his earlier altercation with Paltu. Soon fires appeared in Barrackpore as well—bungalows were set ablaze and the telegraph office was attacked. The Ranigunj pattern was repeated. British officers like Hearsey sensed something amiss but the general feeling was one of complacency.

These fires were the work of urban labourers brought over from Calcutta by Bechan and Machli, Nakki's trusted Lieutenants who then joined ranks with the Barrackpore bazaar elements. The intended effect was to alarm the sepoys—to create an atmosphere of dread and defiance.

Sepoys were alarmingly indifferent to finding out the reason behind the fires—no one was ever caught and the sepoy parties sent down to hunt down the suspects whiled away their time deliberately in the bazaar listening to gossip.

Hearsey took matters in his own hands—ordering the sepoys to assemble on 9 February, he gave a speech in copious Hindustani declaring that the government had no desire to 'tamper with caste and religion'. The sepoys did not believe him—Hearsey, they said used to be a better officer once upon a time. He was the only one left of the old breed, Lt. Wheeler representing the new arrogant section—but even Hearsey, they argued had succumbed to insulting the sepoys. What was the need to give a justification if there was no truth in the matter?

This last sepoy reasoning brings out the level of political maturity they had reached. Hearsey, however, heard another disquieting news—some Barrackpore sepoys had gone to Behrampore and extracted a promise from the 19th NI to revolt.

Hearsey shuddered at the thought—he knew something which officers like Wheeler were unaware of—that both 19th and the 34th had been at Awadh during annexation time.

The *Aalha* records how in Lucknow Mangal saw a British subaltern disgracing an Awadhian noble woman and how he stepped in to stop the abuse. He desired punishment for the subaltern but white officers were stern and asked him not to interfere.

Hearsey clearly expected something dramatic to happen. On 11 February gunpowder and practice cartridges reached Behrampore. The die was now cast—the sepoy would have to make the fatal decision of whether to break their caste or revolt.

Mangal sent Nakki to Behrampore—he, in turn, halted at a caravan and sent Bechan ahead. Bechan delivered a message to the 19th that the 2nd were ready to mutiny—would they join them?

The 19th men did not give their approval for an all out revolt. Nakki then went personally and in a secret meeting found the 19th leaders arguing first for petitioning Hearsey—more radical elements were silenced. A midway compromise was reached—Mangal gave his approval.

Lt. Colonel Mitchell, commanding the 19th believed implicitly that his regiment would not revolt. He called the native officers and they all swore that though they had heard of the cow and pig fat rumour, they did not believe in it. Thus reassured Mitchell ordered a parade on the 27th. By now Sheikh Paltu was keeping a strict watch over Mangal. He had managed to convince Lt. Wheeler about the Brahmin's seditious plans.

Lt. Wheeler, despite his bravado when faced with inquiry over the conversion issue, comes out in the *Aalha* as a weak officer, more the regular cantonment figure who feels safe while toeing the in vogue conservative line but rarely sums up the courage to actually face up to adversity. These kinds of officers were found in every regiments in the months preceding the May '57 events arguing vociferously for punishments to be meted out to sepoys. One enterprising officer actually suggested going all out and really forcing the use of greased cartridges.

It was the custom to distribute percussion caps before the parade. Behrampore sepoys refused to take the caps on 26 February. This was a clear statement as of yet of the soldiers showing open defiance.

Sitaram Tiwari was the leader of the revolutionary cell in the 19th NI. Hailing from Faizabad he knew Mangal well—his uncle had studied Persian and Arabic from Nakki's Maulvi father. Nakki and Mangal were in constant touch and it was Sitaram who had extended the revolutionary network to Ranigunj.

On 26 February Subedar-Major Sheikh Murad Baksh tried playing the role of the middleman but Sitaram's men brushed him off. In what seems like a historic turning point a panchayat was called—placing the religious scriptures the ringleaders made Hindu and Muslim soldiers swear not to take the cartridges.

Murad Baksh panicked—he asked all native officers to settle the issue by 8 pm roll call. He could not believe the level of coordination and unity—the sepoys were found arguing that if an uprising became inevitable the king of Delhi and Wajid Ali Shah who had reached Calcutta would support them. Also, the Bengal zamindars and Brahmins of Barrackpore would come to their help.

From the beginning sepoys were inspired by the idea of initiating a civil rebellion. Murad Baksh was told that the move was not for petty self-interest and he better join them.

Mitchell, himself a 'new' officer, threatened to take action—he told native officers that sepoys refusing to take the cartridge would be packed off to Burma and China. The threat was like adding salt to a bruised, wounded psyche. The issue of travelling by sea and crossing the black waters had ignited the 1824-25 Bengal mutinies. Mitchell also asked the cavalry regiment to be present on the parade ground the next day.

On 26 February, there was turmoil around midnight. To his horror, Murad Baksh found that sepoys had broken the bell of arms and taken their weapons. There was also a roll of drums (meant to imply the gathering of sepoys). Mitchell acted quickly—summoning the cavalry and the artillery he went to the parade ground.

There in the thick of a vaporous, jet black Bengali night, full of people with taut faces, suspicious looks and frayed tempers a compromise was reached. Mitchell agreed to withdraw the cavalry and the artillery, the conditions placed by sepoys before giving up their arms.

For the whole of February and March, Behrampore sepoys were not punished—they had committed a mutinous act but again, bargain avoided bloodshed.

Mangal and Nakki saw the Behrampore incident both as a victory and a partial set back. They had expected the British to be far more severe and Sitaram's men more resolute. Something agreed upon between Behrampore and Barrackpore regiments was not followed. The British set up a court of inquiry where sepoys openly threatened to take to arms again—they blamed Mitchell for speaking in a very rude manner: "we were sure that the cartridges were greased, otherwise he would not spoken so".

Sepoys were watching every British move, even the expressions of the British—the distance was too great even though Lord Canning hoped for the best while agreeing that the cartridge controversy "turned out to be well founded".

British officials were on edge—yet Mangal did not see Behrampore as a victory—Sitaram told him though the 19th believed the 34th would have joined them in the event of a mutiny, he himself was unsure about whether the Bengal zamindars would support the cause. Earlier a zamindar representative who had to deliver a certain amount of money came with less than half the amount and the sepoys were disappointed.

Nakki was not able to contact the Patna Waliullah-ite forces, his lifeline to the Gwalior center. He was now worried as Sitaram told Mangal that he had agreed to a bargain as he was not sure whether sepoys would actually point the musket towards their officers.

The Bengal army's military paternalism in which the sepoy was treated like a child was at test. The old bonds had frayed but the officer corp charisma was strong.

It was at this point that Mangal decided that some kind of ultimate sacrifice was needed soon. Otherwise the Bengal impulse would get diffused. Mangal and Nakki had a meeting with Mukhopadhyay and the Barrackpore zamindar. A new problem cropped up—summing up reports given by the latter two personalities, Nakki observed that propaganda amongst sepoys was working—but the Bengal civil population, especially the zamindars were not ready.

Nakki again proposed the recruitment of Bengal peasantry. The zamindar was distinctly unwilling and he suggested that the friends wait for a while—the zamindars would come around.

Meanwhile Mangal was getting restless—he confided in Nakki that pinning hopes on the Bengal zamindars was a mistake. It would have been better to arouse the peasants even if it meant harm to zamindari interest. Mangal said he knew the sepoy mind—they were peasants and their ferment would soon subside if not followed up by action.

Then an incident occurred—Mangal's woman stopped in Barrackpore. She was in purdah, seated in a *palki* and she cried. Handing out her jewellery she kissed Mangal on the forehead.

No words were exchanged—Mangal heard the heavy pants of Kahars receding into the distance as they left slowly. It was afternoon and the sun was setting. It was also spring and light gold provided a rare consonance to the green in the fields.

All through March there was intense activity—Nakki had received communication from Jhansi and Gwalior. An alternate plan was at work, set into motion by Nana Sahib, Azimullah Khan, Shamsuddin Khan and Azeezun Bai, the Kanpur group to incite rebellion in Meerut. Nakki relaxed—but Gwalior missives spoke also of how the support of Golab Singh, the Punjab and the Maratha princes could not be taken for granted. British agents had got wind that something was afoot and had already started working on the pro-British factions in the various courts.

Gwalior missives talked about a general co-ordination with Kunwar Singh as the Patna group was under serious threat of exposure and the Calcutta forces had almost dispersed. Decision on Bengal was left to Nakki and Mangal—it was requested, however, that a 'spark like lightning might ignite Bengal—if not it will inspire Sepoys in other stations. The name of the brave martyr will be enshrined in gold'.

Mangal met a highly downcast Nakki in Barasat near Barrackpore. The 19th of Behrampore were to be punished for having tried to effect a mutiny. They were to be marched down and disbanded in Barrackpore.

Mangal tried contacting Sitaram Tiwari—Bechan and Machli had gone to Bihar and he had to send a zamindar man. Meanwhile Mangal spoke to his comrades: "rising now is a must. Let's do it before the 19th gets disbanded.[1]"

The more experienced amongst the 34th dithered—they were still not sure about the 19th itself joining them. They talked in the language of a trade union sympathizing with Mangal and the cause, saying that they will rise along with other sepoys in UP and Haryana.

Mangal played a ruse—he told his comrades that Nakki and his team had worked amongst the peasantry and *kisans* (farmers) of Barasat in particular were to keen to join any initiative.

Earlier Nakki had sent Bechan to Barasat where he got support amongst the peasantry and the zamindars. Even the Barrackpore zamindar on Mukhopadhyay's insistence had reached an understanding with some zamindars and serfs. But the latter again looked towards Delhi—they said that "confidence level was not high and the Zamindars were all new men who had served the British". They regarded only the Mughal Badshah as having ancient authority.

Another missive came from Gwalior—it spoke of 'North India on the boil'. Hints were given to start the Bengal uprising however unprepared it may be.

Here the 1857 *tehrik* followed the mass movement pattern. It was left to various decentralized centers to review the local situation and start something—much depended on spontaneity.

In March Mangal received a message from his mother—he was twenty-six years old and he had served the East India army for seven years. She had fixed his marriage in May when his furlough was due.

Between 15th and 26th-27th Mangal spent many hours meditating and offering prayers to Lord Hanuman and Shiva. Dangling between depression and agitation he took to having regular opium doses—then as he realized that his comrades, the revolutionary cell in the 34th were not meeting with much success in the lines, he began dreaming. He always saw a red column with a green flag marching through Faizabad with Bahadur Shah Zafar. The armed procession reaches Lucknow and Wajid Ali Shah embraces Zafar—a British officer lying wounded in a parade ground with arches and minarets tries taking a shot at Zafar but Mangal's booming musket ends his insolence.

On 29 March, around afternoon, Mangal came out from his hut, in a dhoti (rejecting the British pantaloon) and the red tunic in what was to become a sepoy style statement. He first asked the drummer to sound the bugler—then he started berating his men to gather and raise their rifles for honour and religion. Abusing profoundly he looked towards the quarter guard as Major General Hewson came forward and asked the quarter guard to load. The *jemadar* in charge appeared reluctant—the quarter guard advanced a few steps further but refused to load.

Before the event Mangal had a heated argument with his comrades. They tried restraining him but he reasoned that the 19th would be disbanded. It was now or never. The comrades agreed reluctantly to help him in ways possible.

Now Hewson charged at Mangal—he saw Lt. Baugh coming forward on a horse. Loading his musket Mangal fired—Baugh's horse gave way. Then taking out *tulwars* both Baugh and Hewson charged at Mangal. The sepoy guard kept watching, almost immobile. A crowd had begun collecting.

Anywhere familiar with the Gangetic belt traditions would know that Mangal, while trying to commit an act of revolutionary sacrifice, was also engaging in individual combat. *He was appealing to the raw Indo-Gangetic sentiments of the sepoys*. Even his abuses—*chale aao behanchod!—humko aage kar ke khud peeche hat rahe ho? Dharma ki khatir uth khade ho!*—assumed a political character. His style of challenge was an Indian one with a direct bearing to Gangetic belt's street traditions where the brave man provoked the enemy to a fight heroic and square, fought in the open.

The fight was more than even—both Baugh and Hewson had swords and pistols. They, however, lacked the charged, naked power of an Indian pugilist-hero: "Mangal Pandey made a cut with a tulwar at me, but did not strike me. He struck the adjutant [Baugh]. The next cut I received myself....At the same time I was knocked down from behind by one or two blows from a sepoy's musket. I could not recognize the features of the man who struck me; he was regimentally dressed. On rising I advanced again towards [Pandey] and caught him by the collar of the coat with the left hand. I struck him several times with my sword and received another cut from his tulwar. I was again knocked down from behind.[2]"

Baugh too complained that Mangal made a deep cut in his hand, which began to shake. Mangal delivered another blow—he was fighting with one hand waving in the wind, sometimes using both his hands to unleash *tulwar* strokes.

The *Aalha* carries the version further: apparently Mangal drew his *tulwar* along with Baugh and Hewson but he fenced for a long time—the background danced in awkward motion illuminating assorted Barrackpore shades: bottle green landscape, russet sepoy huts, the white officer's blue pantaloon and the Union Jack flowing as if intentionally slowly and gradually. The wind hung literally by the thread awaiting the outcome—the air was thick with the combatants heaving, the occasional swish sound made by sepoys, hovering between obsessive rage and monumental apprehension, and the singularly expansive menace innate to the circumstances.

Sepoys did not get an elaborate fencing class—the skill displayed by Mangal displayed the native style. Bagh and Hewson usually tried to strike top down—the manner prevalent in Europe. Mangal, however, stepped back with alacrity, making slanting cuts, reflected in the pattern of wounds inflicted on the two British officers. Mangal's task was rendered difficult as the two offices occupied his left and right—he had to make sure the adequate distance while stepping back—the European fencing manner was meant to cut the opponent vertically. Mangal took the advantage of the interval between two vertical blows—that alone must have entailed a boxer's footwork as he had to move forward and back almost in a split second.

Mangal's opponents were harried and tired—he outclassed and outsmarted them especially by using the left hand to push and the right to strike—a traditional tactic used in Awadhian martial arts. Soon it was evident that the British were losing an unequal fight where they had the initiative. Both Hewson and Baugh were armed to the teeth and were obviously looking to kill.

Lt. Wheeler, 'the coward evangelist', came along but almost stepped aside when he saw the scene and the fact that the quarter guard was not responding. It is incredible that a third British officer seeing that it was one black man against two white, did not join the combat. Under any other circumstances, the three to one combination would have made mincemeat of the lone challenger.

Later Wheeler told the court that seeing the quarter guard attitude he considered useless a further waste of life! No one asked; British writers never posed the question as to why Wheeler stayed aloof—he committed a criminal act of refraining from helping his comrades yet there was no court martial against him.

Surely with Mangal fighting like an Indian tiger, Wheeler got cold feet; later he boasted that he could have finished Mangal with one hand.

In between Sheikh Paltu stepped in—he held Mangal from behind. Now it was actually three men against one. Sheikh Paltu was either too frightened or hesitant to catch hold of Mangal's hands—Mangal hit him with the elbow when he tried once. Paltu kept to the waist then. Mangal continued his back and forth now carrying Paltu's weight as well. Baugh and Hewson received cuts and were unable to deliver the fatal blow.

Mangal was quiet as he fought on—now fellow sepoys came forward and threatened Paltu with death. Occasionally, they struck Hewson and Baugh from behind with the musket butt. Seeing other sepoys joining in, Hewson and Baugh who had lost the contest started retreating—clearly they had had enough. Wheeler was still a silent spectator and no other British officer dared to intervene.

The news reached Hearsey himself—alarmed at the report that Mangal had tackled two British officers, Hearsey called for his two sons, also serving in the same cantonment, probably because no one else could be trusted.

Riding to the quarter guard Hearsey loaded his pistol—the quarter guard also started loading his musket. Hearsey's sons warned their father—but Hearsey brought his pistol to bear on the quarter guard first. He ordered the guard to follow him asking his sons to rush and kill Mangal if he died.

Mangal began reloading—he could still kill Hearsey—then a thought flashed in his mind. Sepoys who helped him by using the musket butt had not loaded. The quarter guard was hesitant. Indian sepoys probably were not in a mood or excited enough to kill or mutiny *at that instant*.

At the same time, Mangal had achieved what he had set out to do—aroused his men, shown them that British officers were chicken and could not stand an open fight—that two of them could be beaten back with guts and determination. This was enough for the moment.

In an act, which the *Aalha* laments as Mangal's fatal, long sighted approach (*doordarshita*) Mangal pointed the musket towards his breast and touched the trigger with his toe.

Mangal was wounded—the bullet grazed his left shoulder muscles. He was arrested immediately and sent to the hospital. The 34th remained sullen and awake throughout the night. Some of them were clearly in a mutinous mood—they went all the way to Barasat to confer with the 19th—plans were discussed for an uprising but Sitaram Tiwary interpreted Mangal's act—"let them try him and disband—the whole country will see our disgrace and revolt"[3].

The 19th decided not to mutiny—it was disbanded on 30 March at the very place Mangal performed the heroic deed. The action was not accompanied by violence—instead there was a deathly silence

Sheikh Paltu was suddenly promoted even before Mangal's court martial began. Mangal remained quiet even when asked pointedly whether he had any accomplices and whether he was under any 'influence'. He refused to cross-examine the witnesses. The verdict was a foregone conclusion. Striking at white officers was like signing one's death warrant. The rigours of a judicial process were mainly an eye-wash.

Mangal's comrades at one point offered to set him free—Mangal refused. "Let them try me—the British make a great deal out of their system of justice. I want to show the world the farce of British judicial system"[4].

The court martial declared Mangal guilty. Other British officers were not questioned as regards their conduct.

Mangal's posture till his death by hanging on 8 April remained that of a satyagrahi.

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2. Selection from the Letters, Despatches & Other State Papers preserved in the military department of the Government of India, 1857-58, vol.I, pp.118-119.
3. *Aalha Mangal Pandey*
4. ibid.

Epilogue

Mangal's death was mourned all the way from Calcutta to Patna to the Gangetic belt artery. The commemoration was silent yet precise—it took into account the fact that the British are out to destroy the Hindustani identity of the sepoys and their judicial system was preposterous and biased.

Mangal's death sowed a complicated seed—or disappointment, disillusionment, helplessness and ultimately boldness, reckoning and insurgency.

The *Aalha* is silent on the fate of Mangal's woman. Nakki Khan escaped, wrested Mangal's ashes with help from fellow sepoys and passed messages to Peer Ali. Nakki and Ali wept over Mangal-Nakki reached Mangal's village after the 10th

May uprising in Meerut and handed Mangal's ashes to his mother before marching on to Lucknow to take part in the 30 May rising.

Mangal's regiment was disbanded on 21 April. In a fit of defiance rarely seen in the Bengal army, 34th BNI sepoys threw their caps to the ground and trampled them. It was clear that the arm through which the British had conquered India was going to strike back.

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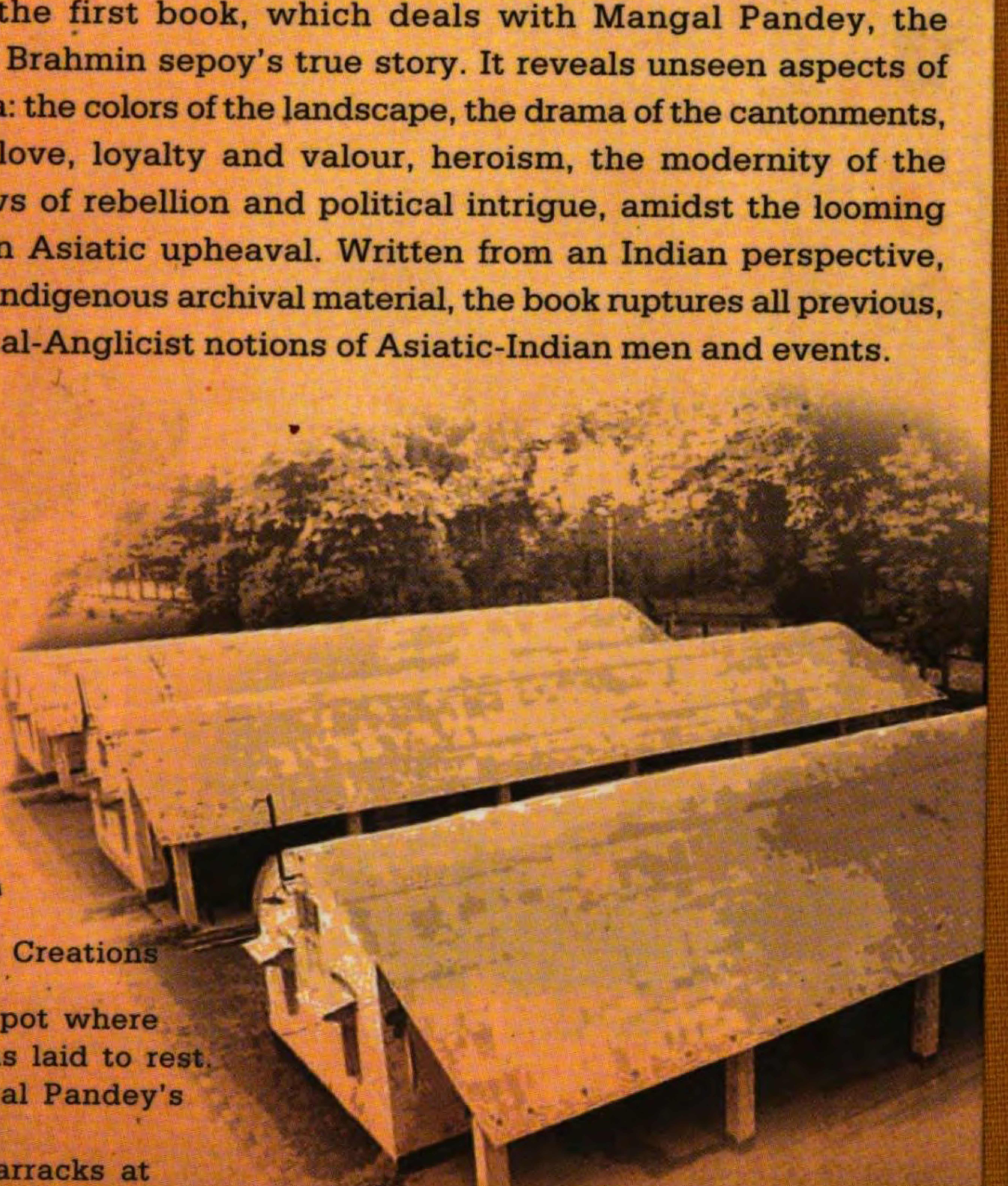
Mangal Pandey was not impulsive.
Much had brewed in his mind before he ignited
the pulse of the people to revolt.
The legacy of Mangal Pandey must live
to keep India's composite culture alive.

GULZAR

On March 29, 1857 a Brahmin sepoy shot at a British officer in Barrackpore, Bengal. The incident was not the first of its kind— or the last. Two months later the British East India Company faced a major civil rebellion and political insurrection/restoration, accompanied by military mutinies in North India. The event ended British cultural hegemony, revived Indian-ness and kept alive an alternative Asiatic perspective —western authors still call it 'The Mutiny' but for Indians it was the 'First War of Indian Independence'.

This is the first book, which deals with Mangal Pandey, the Barrackpore Brahmin sepoy's true story. It reveals unseen aspects of colonial India: the colors of the landscape, the drama of the cantonments, conflicts of love, loyalty and valour, heroism, the modernity of the peasant, laws of rebellion and political intrigue, amidst the looming specter of an Asiatic upheaval. Written from an Indian perspective, marshalling indigenous archival material, the book ruptures all previous, exotic-oriental-Anglicist notions of Asiatic-Indian men and events.



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Front Cover: The spot where
Mangal Pandey was laid to rest.
Background: Mangal Pandey's
execution orders.
Back Cover: The barracks at